

A woman with blonde hair styled in an updo is shown from the back, looking over her shoulder. She is wearing a long, flowing purple gown with puffed sleeves and a full skirt. She stands in a lush green garden with manicured hedges. In the background, a large, ornate building with multiple windows and spires is visible under a cloudy sky. There are small white starburst effects in the garden.

An Unexpected Love

FANNY FINCH

Copyright

Copyright © 2021 by Fanny Finch

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.



Get Fanny's Exclusive Material

Visit the author's website to get your free copy of Fanny Finch's bestselling books!

Just click on the link below:

Fannyfinch.com

Table of Contents

Copyright

Get Fanny's Exclusive Material

Table of Contents

An Unexpected Love (The Heart of Dorset Series: Book 2)

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Training Lord Somerset - Preview](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Be A Part of Fanny Finch's Family](#)

[About Starfall Publications](#)

[About Fanny Finch](#)

[Also by Fanny Finch](#)

An Unexpected Love (The Heart of Dorset Series: Book 2)

Prologue

“Fifteen for two,” Angela sang as she snapped the card down on the table.

She leant forward and moved the peg along two spaces on the crib board. She was a good fifteen ahead of her brother, and she was delighted by that fact. Though William rarely beat her, she still enjoyed the win.

They were sitting cross-legged on the floor, playing on the low oak table that normally sat between two pale yellow couches in the parlor. They had dragged it out into the center of the room to give themselves more space, and at one end of it, the maid had placed a jug of fresh lemonade and two glasses.

“It’s not fair,” William said, pouting at the three cards fanned in his hand. “You always get the good ones. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were cheating.”

“Luck of the draw, little brother,” Angela said. “Perhaps the universe is being kind to me because I’m the good child and you’re the naughty one.”

“I am *not* naughty,” he protested, his eyebrows crossed. “And you’re not the good one, either. Lydia is.”

“Well Lydia isn’t here, is she? So right now, I am the good one. And the best at cribbage, evidently.”

William huffed loudly.

“Come on,” she said. “Play. You only have three cards. How hard can it be to decide?”

“Fine,” he said. “Eight makes twenty-three.”

“And eight is thirty-one for two!” She laughed loudly, letting the card float to the table then moving her peg yet again.

“How is that fair?” William asked, staring aghast at the cards on the table.

“How is it not fair?” Angela asked. “Play your next card, please.”

“Fine. Three.”

“And seven makes ten,” she said. “You should be able to get this one.”

“I wouldn’t be lucky enough to have a five,” he said with a sulk.

“Three makes thirteen.”

All of a sudden, Angela felt sorry for her little brother. It did seem he was dreadfully unlucky when it came to cards, and he really did try.

“At least you get one for using the last card,” she said brightly.

He grunted, then scrambled to his feet and wandered over to the window.

“I’m not playing anymore,” he said.

“Don’t you even want to count up the points in your hand? And it was your box.”

“No,” he said, staring out at the wide driveway leading up to the house. “You’ve won regardless.”

Rain fell heavily against the window pane and the clouds in the sky were a dark gray. Angela couldn’t remember the last time the weather was so utterly miserable. If it hadn’t been so bad, they could have gone for a walk or taken the horses out, but instead they were stuck indoors playing cards. Much to William’s chagrin.

“Not necessarily,” Angela said. “There’s a chance you can still take it.”

She quickly totted up the totals in her head, spreading the cards out with her fingertips. She pushed her lips together and quietly collected the rest of the cards without saying another word. He was right; she had won.

“When are Mother and Father going to get here?” he asked.

“They’re due home this evening. Stop fretting. Shall we play something else if you’re bored of cribbage?”

Angela got up and went to stand behind him, her hands on his shoulders as they both stared out. The rain spattered against the driveway, drops of water splashing back up into the air.

“No,” William said. “I want to go outside.”

Angela sighed. “But you know that’s not possible, William. Look at the weather. At nearly twelve years old, you should be able to work that out for yourself.”

“Please excuse me, Lady Angela.”

Angela looked up to see Beaumont, the butler, stood in the doorway. All the color seemed to have drained from his face, and he looked as if he'd just had the most awful news. She turned and took a few slow steps towards him.

“What is it, Beaumont? Is everything all right?”

He moved aside to reveal two very serious-looking constables. Angela frowned, looking at them questioningly. The pounding in her heart and the fear in Beaumont's eyes told her this was bad news, very bad news indeed.

But what?

“My lord, my lady” the first constable said, nodding first to William and then to Angela. “I'm sorry to disturb you but . . . shall we

sit down?”

He was much taller and broader than his companion. His neck wobbled as he spoke, but other than that, he held himself perfectly still. The second constable, smaller but with an equal presence, stood at his side, his eyes lowered to the floor.

Angela nodded slowly, aware her mouth was open, but the fear that shot through her prevented her from doing anything about it. The constables took one couch, while Angela and William took the second, and Beaumont and his wife—the housekeeper—remained motionless in the corner, a haunted look on their faces.

“What’s this about?” William asked, clearly not grasping the gravity of the situation. “What on earth is the matter? Why is everyone acting as though something terrible has happened?”

Angela put a hand out to stop William saying anything further, lightly touching his knee. “Let the constables speak, William,” she said without looking at him.

At that moment, thunder cracked above. She jumped, pulling in a sharp breath, but she held herself tense and firm, not letting the fear of the moment get to her.

“I’m Constable Woods,” the larger man said. “And this is my colleague, Mr. Brown.”

Angela blinked at them, unsure what to think. “How do you do,” she said after a long moment.

“I’m afraid we have some bad news,” Woods said.

“There’s been a coach accident,” Brown added.

The words didn't seem to make sense, not at first, and Angela furrowed her brow, trying to work out what the constables were saying.

“An accident?”

“Near the coast,” Woods said. “I regret to inform you that the accident claimed the lives of your parents.”

Angela froze to the spot, her eyes boring a hole into the Turkish carpet on the floor. She could feel her chest rising and falling rapidly with her breaths; she could hear the sound of her own blood rushing through her ears and the rain hammering on the thin window panes.

She felt the constables' eyes on her, burning her, and the pity coming from the Beaumonts in waves. Mrs. Beaumont whimpered,

though it sounded as though it came from a far distance, and beside her, William let out a loud and ugly sob.

And still she could not move.

“They’re . . . they’re dead?” William asked in a weak voice.

“Yes, Lord William,” Brown said slowly, his voice dripping with sympathy. “I’m sorry to tell you that they have passed.”

A wail tore through him and Angela blindly put a hand to the side, hoping to grasp hold of him but finding only air. When she finally managed to pull her eyes away from the floor, she looked up at the constables in question.

“And my sister?” she asked, her voice thick with emotion. “What news of her?”

“Lady Lydia survived, along with the coachman,” Woods said.

“The two have been taken to the local hospital.”

“But they’ll be all right?”

Brown opened his mouth long before any sound came out. He looked down at his feet. “It’s best you ask the physician or surgeon that question. I’m afraid we don’t know anything further.”

Angela swallowed, looked back down at the floor, and then nodded. Part of her wanted to scream and cry and wail, as William was doing. But she couldn’t. She could barely move.

Only this morning, Angela’s life had been a full and happy one. She had a loving family and a bright future. And now, all she could feel was a void, a dark and empty place that was not yet filled with

pain but would be, very, very soon.

“What happened?” Angela asked.

“There is an investigation ongoing,” Woods said. “But we believe there may have been an issue with the coach.”

“I see.”

“Angela.” She turned to William’s shaky word. His cheeks were stained with tears and his eyes brimming with pain. “What will become of us?”

She put her arm around him and pulled him into a hug. “We’ll survive,” she whispered. “We’ll overcome this.”

“Would you like to accompany us to the facility?” Brown asked.

“To see your sister?”

“Yes, please, thank you,” Angela said, quickly getting to her feet.

“I’ll just . . . um . . .”

“It’s all right, Lady Angela,” Beaumont said, stepping forward. “I have your cloaks and hats at the ready, and Mrs. Beaumont shall chaperone. Everything will be taken care of here. You need to be with Lady Lydia.”

“Yes,” Angela said, nodding at Beaumont though still unable to raise her eyes. “Thank you, Beaumont, that’s . . . Come on now, William.”

She managed to turn and look at her brother, but she quickly turned away again, holding her hand out for him to take. She couldn’t

bear to see him so hurt and broken, especially when she knew it was only going to get worse. She had to hold it together, at the very least until they knew more.

The journey to the hospital seemed to take forever. Angela took turns between willing the coach to go faster, and praying they'd never get there at all. She wasn't sure she wanted to discover what they would find, but she knew she had to be there for her sister.

William had mercifully stopped sobbing, and he lay curled by Angela's side, cuddling into her, already having exhausted himself. She idly brushed his blonde hair with her fingertips as she stared out of the window, hoping this would all turn out to be some dreadful mistake.

"We're here, Lady Angela," Mrs. Beaumont said.

Angela turned her head to see the door to the coach had been opened. The two constables were waiting patiently, hands clasped in front of them.

“Yes, of course,” Angela said, nudging William to get up.

They walked slowly into the hospital, avoiding everyone’s gaze. It felt, to Angela, as if all eyes were upon them, that all and sundry knew of the tragedy that had befallen them that day. Her cheeks burned and her eyes prickled with unshed tears, but she pushed on, focusing only on the next step, then the next, her hand clutching William’s tightly.

Lydia, their older sister, was in a room of her own, with a small closed window. It smelled of antiseptic and something else Angela couldn’t place. Something medical. Something sick.

Death, perhaps?

“We’ll give you a few moments alone with your sister,” Woods said, ushering Mrs. Beaumont out of the room with him and closing the door. Closing them in.

Angela glanced back at the door with a beat of panic, then at the bed again. She couldn’t see Lydia from where she was standing, only a vague shape in the bed. Still holding onto William’s hand, she took the four small steps required to be by Lydia’s side.

“Lydia?” No reply. “What’s wrong with her?” William asked.

“She’s sleeping,” Angela said. She pointed at the gentle movement in her chest. “See, she’s breathing.”

“Well that’s . . .”

“Something, yes.”

“But her face,” William said.

“Yes,” Angela repeated, not trusting herself to say anything further.

Poor Lydia’s face was heavily bandaged, though it looked clean and neat. Her body looked so small under a mass of blankets, and her breathing was so quiet it was barely there.

“She looks peaceful, at least,” Angela said, noting her closed eyes and wrinkle-free forehead.

“She is.”

The man's voice came from behind them and Angela spun around to face him. He wore a dark suit with a white shirt, and he carried a large leather bag at his side.

"I am Dr. Taylor," he said by way of explanation. "The physician."

Angela let out a tiny sigh of relief and nodded.

"Will she be all right?" William asked.

"Yes," Dr. Taylor replied. "She will be fine. She needs a lot of rest and recuperation, but with time, she will recover. I have given her a sedative—that's why she looks, as you said, peaceful. It has put her into a deep sleep, and that will help her recovery."

He walked around to the other side of Lydia's bed and put his bag on the small bedside table. Opening it with a click, he pulled out two different bottles of powder and a salve. Angela watched carefully, curious about what he was doing and what it would mean for his sister.

"I will talk through this with Lady Lydia herself when she is awake," he said. "But the powders are for pain—of which I am sure she will be in once she wakes. And the salve is for her cuts. It will help keep them clean and heal them quicker."

"Are there a lot of cuts?" Angela asked. She swallowed back the tears that threatened to come, now that this all seemed so real.

"A . . . a few, across different parts of her body," he said, his gaze flickering to Lydia's still form.

“And her face?” Angela asked.

The physician closed his eyes and sighed. “There is one particularly bad wound on her face.”

“How bad?” William asked.

“It required stitching,” Dr. Taylor said. “And it runs from her jaw, here.” He pointed to his own chin, just to the left of his mouth. “Up to her hairline, here. I suspect that is the origin of most of her pain.”

Angela let out a whimper, her brow heavily creasing. “But it will heal, yes?”

The physician bit his bottom lip, looking at Angela with all the pity in the world.

“It’s likely her face will be scarred for life,” he said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh!”

The physician looked sympathetic as he went over to check on Lydia. He checked her pulse and forehead before writing something down in his booklet. “Once she is back home, I will be making periodic visits to make sure she is healing properly and has not developed an infection. Your housing staff will need to be updated on how to clean her wounds and change her dressings.”

Angela whimpered again and took a step backwards, her hands flailing behind her for something to grasp hold of. This was all too much. So much, in fact, that she was grateful for the knock at the door, for something to take her mind off matters.

It was Constable Woods, poking his head around the door as if popping in for a casual greeting.

“Please excuse me, Dr. Taylor, but may I borrow Lady Angela for a moment?”

“Of course,” the physician replied and smiled kindly down at Angela.

She didn’t want him to be kind. She just wanted him to make all this go away. But she nodded her thanks and left the room anyway, William quick on her heels.

“I know this will be difficult,” Woods said, “but I’m going to need you to accompany me down to the coroner’s place.”

“The mortuary!” William cried. “But why?”

Angela knew why instantly, but she let the constable explain it to William.

“We need someone to officially identify the bodies we found in the wreckage,” Woods said as gently as he could.

Angela nodded.

“No!” William said, suddenly forceful, and he stepped forward.

“No, Angela doesn’t need to do that. *I* will do it.”

Angela pulled him back around to face her and put her arms around him, burying her nose in his hair.

“No, William,” she said quietly. “It needs to be me. I am older. You stay with Lydia; she needs you more right now.”

He was still for a long moment, but then he nodded and pulled away. They shared a long look before Angela turned and followed the constable out of the room, dreading the moment she would lay eyes on her parents’ mangled corpses.

Chapter 1

Two Years Later

“Home, sweet home.”

Edward stepped into the drawing room of Nordshire Manor and sighed with satisfaction. He’d missed this place—his home since he was twelve years old. And now he had returned from university, he was looking forward to settling back in.

He poured himself a brandy, the heavy crystal decanter clunking loudly against the glass, and then held the glass to his chest as he gazed out of the window. As much as he was enjoying his schooling, he much preferred it when it didn’t take him away from his home.

“There you are, my boy!” the Earl of Nordshire boomed as he

swung the door open and strode in. “It’s wonderful to have you finally back.”

“Uncle Mason!”

Edward put the glass down and pulled his uncle into a hug, the two men patting each other’s backs amiably. At twenty-five years old, Edward Lancaster had a close relationship with his uncle, the elder brother of his late father.

He had never known his mother for she died during childbirth. As for his father, his attempts at being a hero and breaking up a brawl in the streets led to him being fatally wounded. His uncle had kindly taken Edward in, and since then they grew to love each other like father and son.

“Brandy?” Edward asked, shaking his glass in his uncle’s

direction. “Something to whet your whistle before dinner?”

“Why not, dear boy,” Mason said, taking a seat next to the fire.

“Why ever not.”

“How is Aunt Eugenia? In good health, I hope?” he asked over his shoulder as he poured his uncle’s drink.

“She’s *feeling a little under the weather*,” Mason said with a roll of his eyes. “That’s why she can’t come and greet you.”

“Ah, the old *feeling under the weather* excuse,” Edward chuckled.

“Well, I do hope she is feeling much better by tomorrow.”

Of course, they both knew there was nothing wrong with Aunt Eugenia. While Edward was close to his uncle, the same most definitely could not be said of his aunt, and Edward knew her refusal

to greet him was a snub more than anything else.

He didn't mind it, or, more aptly, he had grown used to it in the thirteen years they had lived together. Edward was strong of spirit, and while he aimed to be both pleasurable and friendly, he refused to get despondent if someone took a disliking to him.

He was a typical Lancaster man in looks, there being a particular brand of handsomeness that seemed reserved only for them. He was tall and broad, his shoulders squared and always held high. His hair, the color of chestnuts, was straight and short, and he wore neatly trimmed and squared sideburns that stretched onto his cheeks.

His eyes were a bright green, rich and deep, and they told a tale of overcoming hardship and grief. He never let his past overwhelm his present, though, instead using all he had overcome to make him a better man.

He was kind and fair, always determined to do the right thing and proving it at every moment he could. He was learned, too, being a man of books and scholarly pursuits. He soaked in knowledge easily and eagerly whenever he could, and he loved a good debate.

“Tell me,” Mason asked. “How are your studies going?”

He crossed one leg over the other and took the brandy glass from Edward.

“All but finished,” Edward said, sitting in the seat opposite his uncle, on either side of the gently roaring fire. “In an official capacity, at least. You know me, Uncle Mason; my studies will never truly end.”

“I don’t know how you do it, my boy,” Mason said with a chuckle. “I really don’t. You are a sponge for learning. So, what’s next, if university is officially over?”

“I’ve secured a job as a junior partner in a London solicitor’s office. I start in two months’ time.”

“Oh, Edward! That’s wonderful news. Your father would be so proud.”

Mason leant forward and clinked his glass against his nephew’s. Edward smiled, thinking of the man who would never see him as an adult. He missed his father, even though they had never really been close, and at Edward’s young age, he hadn’t truly given his father much thought.

“Thank you, Uncle Mason. That means a lot to me.”

“Nonsense, I’m only speaking the truth. We’re all terribly proud of you, my boy. You take after him, actually, your father. He always

fought for what was right and fair.”

“And that’s what ultimately killed him,” Edward reminded him.

“Well yes, that was terribly unfortunate, but that does not mean he was wrong to do it. If I knew my brother at all, I can safely say he would rather die doing the right thing than shirk away from what he thought to be his duty.”

Edward sighed and looked down at his glass. He knew how his father felt, for it was how he felt, too. “I can only hope I become half the man he was.”

“You’re already on your way, my dear boy,” Mason said seriously, looking at Edward from under his brow. “Honestly, I wish my own son would take a leaf out of your book.”

“Where is James anyway? I would have thought he would be here.”

A dark shadow crossed over Mason’s face, and he stared into the fire with furrowed brows. Edward watched him carefully—he knew James to be somewhat of a disappointment to his father, his behavior both rakish and often unkind.

But Mason loved his son and desperately wanted to be a good father. It bothered him deeply that he could even begin to consider his only son and heir a disappointment. Mason was a good man, kind and loving and wishing for only the best, and he had a heart made of gold.

He was a good earl, treating his Earldom with the respect and deference it required, and completing all his tasks with honor. He was quick-witted, too, and perceptive, and he was held in high regard by anyone who knew him.

At fifty-seven years old, Mason Lancaster was an older version of Edward and almost identical to his late brother. He had the height of the Lancaster men, and the broad shoulders, too. But while his eyes still shone with emerald green, he wore spectacles perched on the end of his nose, and his hair had long ago grayed.

“That bad?” Edward risked asking, trying to catch his uncle’s eye. Mason sighed.

“Things have not improved,” he said, watching the flames dance and flicker. “I just wish I could have had some sort of positive effect on the boy when he was growing up. Perhaps he would not be the way he is now. It’s my fault, ultimately.”

“It’s not your fault,” Edward insisted. “You have been a good father and given him all the very best in life. Now that he is an adult, he must take responsibility for his own choices.”

“Oh, I suppose you’re right,” Mason said with a sigh. “I just wish there was something I could do. He will inherit the title when I pass, after all.”

Uncle Mason and James had never had a good relationship, and Edward suspected that was partly thanks to Aunt Eugenia’s influence, though he would never be disrespectful enough to say as much.

Their marriage had been arranged, and though they’d had a tentative friendship in the beginning, the love they had been promised never arrived. Since James’ birth, things had only gotten worse, with the couple disagreeing on almost every aspect of child rearing. That was made even worse when she accused Uncle Mason of taking more interest in raising Edward than James, though he tried his best to raise them both equally.

“One good thing has happened though,” Mason said, a little brighter. “Humphrey has returned and is set to become the Earl of

Somerset. You remember Humphrey, don't you?"

"The Duke of Wiltshire's son?" Edward asked. "I've made his acquaintance once or twice, but I never really got to know him."

"He's a nice boy, by all accounts. Responsible and honorable—and no doubt worldly wise now, after such a long time spent at sea. He and James have been friends since they were children. It's where James is now, welcoming Humphrey home from his travels."

"He will come round in the end, Uncle. You just wait and see."

"Well, I'm hoping Humphrey will have a good effect on him, especially now the Duke has handed him the title. Anyhow, let's stop talking of this depressing stuff. What are your plans for this evening?"

"You know, being at university, I am yet to meet another man

who can challenge me at cards like my uncle can,” he said wistfully.

“How about a game of piquet?”

Mason grinned, and the two got up from their seats.

“If it’s a challenge you want, my boy,” he said, slapping Edward on the back. “Then you’ve come to the right place.”

Chapter 2

Angela walked happily up the driveway of the Dorset estate, pleased to be out in the sunshine. Though spring was not yet in full swing, the sky was a pale blue and there was not a cloud in sight.

She even thought she heard a nightingale somewhere in the trees, singing his happy song, though it seemed unlikely given the time of day. They normally kept their song for dawn and dusk, not for early afternoon.

“You must be as content as I am, little bird,” Angela said, smiling up into the trees in the direction of the music.

Angela Stanley, the second daughter of the late Duke of Dorset, was a bright and bubbly eighteen-year-old girl—soon to be a young lady, with her debut on the horizon. She had a tall, slim frame, with an ample bosom that suited the fashionable empire line gowns.

She wore her blonde hair in gentle curls and her eyes were the color of chocolate. She was as youthful in spirit as she was in body, and her nature was naturally studious, making her eager to listen and even more eager to learn.

She was shy, almost coy at times, until she felt comfortable in someone's presence. Then, the true Angela came out, revealing the fun, chatty glimmer of an intelligent and witty personality.

Above all, Angela loved her family. With her parents gone, she had come to admire and adore her older sister, Lydia, and she felt a fierce, almost maternal drive to protect her younger brother, William. Together, the three of them banded to overcome their grief and to face the world with strength and determination.

“Excuse me.”

Angela almost fell against the trees that lined the side of the driveway, as Lord Henry Twinkle, son of Viscount Banthem, shuffled past her at quite some speed. She watched her sister's latest suitor go, his head down and his shoulders hunched, and she sighed heavily.

Yet another man who cannot see past her scar.

She watched him go, shaking her head, until he had turned the corner and was out of sight. Then she turned and positively ran to the house, eager to talk to her sister.

"Good afternoon, Lady Angela," Beaumont said as she burst through the door.

She often wondered whether the butler simply waited in the entrance hall for someone to appear, even though she knew he had

plenty of other duties. He was somehow always there.

“Good afternoon, Beaumont,” she sang. “And what a beautiful day it is, too.” She turned to allow him to help her with her cloak.

“Indeed, my lady.”

“Say,” she said, turning back to him and pulling on the ribbon of her bonnet. “Was that Lord Twinkle I saw leaving just now?”

“It was,” Beaumont said with a nod, taking the bonnet from her. “Your sister is in the study, if you wish to see her.”

Angela smiled up at him. He had such an instinct for knowing what she wanted, what any of them wanted.

“Thank you, Beaumont,” she said, and went to skip away.

“Oh, one thing before you go, Lady Angela,” he said, calling her back.

“Yes?” she asked, her hair flying out as she spun around.

“One moment.” He scuttled into his room just to the right of the entrance, and returned with a letter on rich cream paper, the red wax seal stark against it. He held it out to her. “It’s from His Grace, young William, my lady.”

“Oh, goody! It feels like an age since we heard from him.”

Beaumont chuckled. “It’s been two weeks, my lady.”

“Still,” Angela said with a grin, and she reached out to snatch the letter from Beaumont. “Thank you, Beaumont,” she said.

She scampered into the parlor, ripping the wax seal as she went, excited to see what her brother had to say. Ever since he left for Eton, she had missed him terribly, the few weekends he returned home never being quite enough. As a family, they were as close as they could be, and it sometimes hurt that they were so far away from one another.

Her eyes flitted quickly over the words, and she squealed with joy when she reached the part in which he asked if he could join them in London for the season. He knew it was Angela’s debut and he wanted to show his support, especially since he was now the Duke of Dorset although he didn’t go by his new title yet.

Plus, he said that he missed them, and that warmed Angela’s heart, filling her up with the love she felt for her siblings. She laughed

with sheer delight at the thought, allowing the letter to fall into her lap.

The only problem, she realized, would be Lydia. It wasn't that Lydia would be reluctant to see William, but Angela knew just how much Lydia cared about their younger brother's studies and wanted him to focus on that in order for him to become an effective and successful duke.

She leapt to her feet again, clutching the letter in her left hand, and she ran to the study, hoping to catch Lydia before she got herself too involved in some sort of business or other.

"Lord Henry looked as though he were in quite a hurry," Angela said as she skipped into the room without knocking. "Did he have somewhere important to be?"

“He’s probably off to see some pretty slip of a thing,” Lydia muttered, not raising her eyes from her papers.

“Whatever do you mean?” Angela asked, approaching the desk with some trepidation. If her sister was not in a positive mood, this wouldn’t be a good time to bring up William’s potential visit.

“I mean,” Lydia said, looking up at Angela, “that he is yet another man that doesn’t think with his brain and focuses on the wrong things.”

Angela hid her sigh beneath her breath. She guessed that the real reason for Lord Henry’s departure was because he focused on her facial scar, but she dearly wished her sister didn’t think it. She hated Lydia’s self-deprecating side and wanted more than anything to help her improve her confidence. This is possibly one of the reasons why her sister took a more analytical approach to life. She was so good at everything, but Angela wished she would care about her own

happiness more.

Lydia Stanley, at twenty-two years old, was as tall and slim as Angela herself, though her hair was a shocking white-blonde compared to Angela's yellow, and her blue eyes shone out with determination and strength.

She had once been the most beautiful young lady in London, with no shortage of suitors calling on her daily throughout each season, but all that had changed the day of the coach accident that had killed their parents.

Now, Lydia was marred with a scar that ran from her jawbone to her hairline, and where her body had repaired itself, scars could be seen across her neckline and chest. Many men—far too many, in Angela's opinion—saw that and ran away, unable to handle the disfigurement. But her beauty was still there. If only they could look past her scars, they would see it too.

Though, to Angela, Lydia was still incredibly beautiful. Her eyes were piercing and her smile sweet, on the rare occasions that she decided to bestow a smile on someone. She carried herself with pride and strength, and she demonstrated her intelligence and wit wherever she went.

Angela had long suspected it was not Lydia's scar that scared so many suitors away. Rather, it was her fierce resolve and the forceful nature she had garnered since their parents' death. Unknowingly, Lydia was often cold to members of the opposite sex, and Angela watched with sadness as her sister so consistently pushed people away.

"You are *not* hideous," Angela replied after a pause. "You are very beautiful, and you know it."

She had said those words so many times before and she knew

they would not make a single jot of difference, but she had to try. She hoped that if she said them often enough, Lydia would eventually come to believe them.

“It matters not, anyhow,” Lydia said, lowering herself into her chair. Angela watched with resignation. “I have long given up on my own prospects, but you, my dearest sister, have so much yet to come.”

“Oh, don’t be like that, please, Lydia,” Angela replied, hearing—and hating—the whine in her own voice. She thought it made her sound like a petulant child, but sometimes it came out all of its own accord. She prayed she would grow out of it, in time.

“When the season starts next week, you’ll have your debut—and about time, too. You’re eighteen now, Angela. It’s time we found you a good match.”

Angela tried to act nonchalant, though she suspected she failed. She was already two years behind her peers, though with good reason, and she was excited to debut, to meet new people and to experience new things.

The gown for her first ball had already been selected, and it was quite possibly the most beautiful gown Angela had ever seen. She would dance the night away, and with as many different suitors as she could. Lydia was right—this was her time to shine, and she simply couldn't wait.

“Oh! I almost forgot,” Angela said, pulling the letter from the folds of her gown. *Here goes.* “This arrived this morning. It’s from William.”

“What does it say?” Lydia asked, eyeing the missive suspiciously.

“Read it yourself,” Angela said, thrusting the letter at Lydia and throwing her a gentle smile.

“His handwriting has improved, at least,” Lydia muttered.

Angela watched her sister’s eyes darting across the words and she silently prayed Lydia would react positively. She would want to, Angela knew, but it was more a matter of whether she could allow herself to. Poor Lydia had so much responsibility, and while she desperately needed a little light relief at times, Angela knew she found it difficult to take it.

“He wants a holiday from school,” Lydia said, looking back up at Angela.

“Only for two weeks,” Angela replied. She held a hand across her belly and raised her eyebrows in hopeful question. “He knows we’ll be

in London for the season and he's eager to see us. What do you think?"

"Well, I don't know," Lydia said.

She blinked rapidly and Angela knew she was taken aback, surprised by this request. This was the moment Angela had to put forward her case. She took a step closer to her sister, offering her a warm smile.

"It would be a great opportunity for us to spend time together again, like we used to. Don't you remember the long days the three of us would spend together? I miss it dreadfully, and I know dear William does too."

"Of course I remember," Lydia replied with at least a drop of sympathy—a *good sign*, Angela thought. "But things were different

then. His schooling is of the utmost importance. He cannot simply take a holiday because the fancy takes him.”

Oh.

Angela opened her mouth to make her case further when her sister quite abruptly got up from her seat and wandered towards the door. Angela didn't move for a moment, blinking at the space Lydia had left, but then she swung around and followed her sister out.

“Well?” she asked, watching as Lydia pulled her cloak from the hook by the door.

“We'll talk about this later,” Lydia said. “I've just remembered. I must visit poor old Tom.”

“The gardener?” Angela felt her head retreat into her neck, her

brows pushed together in question. Why on earth would Lydia be visiting the gardener?

“He’s sick,” Lydia explained, doing up the buttons on her cloak.
“I shall visit his home by the docks.”

Lydia opened the door and trotted down the steps as Angela called to her. “But what about William?”

“I’ll deal with it later,” she called over her shoulder. “Don’t fret about it, dear sister. Everything will be just fine.”

Angela stood in the doorway, watching her go with her mouth hanging open.

“But . . .”

It was no good. Lydia would listen when Lydia was ready and not before. Angela wished she could better understand her sister, but she had no idea where to start.

With a low sigh, she quietly closed the front door, then turned and wandered through the hall. She would go to the library and read a while, for at least books made sense.

Chapter 3

The light of the moon was bright through Edward's window. He never did like drawing his curtains when he went to bed, instead preferring his room to become one with the night. He liked to watch the twinkle of the stars, noting the phase of the moon, as he drifted off to sleep. He liked, too, when the dawn crept up on him, waking him gently.

There was no drifting off to sleep that night, though. He had lain there for hours, watching the night sky, but for whatever reason, he found he could not sleep. It had been a week since his return to Nordshire Manor and barely a thing had happened, though what he was hoping for, he did not know.

He and Uncle Mason had played many a hand at cards, while

Aunt Eugenia had greeted him coldly—as if he'd expected anything else. As for his cousin, James, they had barely seen one another, and when they did, James pretended Edward did not exist, much as he had throughout their formative years.

With a sigh, Edward threw off his blanket and sat on the edge of the bed. He reached over for the tinderbox—a gift from his uncle before he left for university—and lit the candle that sat in the small holder on the bedside table.

Next, he picked up the pocket watch that was once his father's. Though it was old in style, Edward cherished it more than any of his other belongings. It was gold, with an opaque cover that hid the face, and a strong golden chain leading from the small ring at the top.

He pressed down on the button and the cover clicked open, revealing the white face with its roman numerals and ornate hands fitted with the tiniest of diamonds.

“Gone midnight,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his tired eyes. “And still, sleep evades me.”

He glanced once more out of the window, at his good friend the moon. It was full tonight, and almost as bright as the day, and Edward wondered, as he often did, about those myths of the man in the moon. He knew it was crazy to think such things, but he marveled at the idea of one day visiting to discover him.

He let out a bubble of laughter. “Edward Lancaster, never has there been a more fanciful man.”

He rose from the bed and pulled his banyan down from the hook, slipping it over his shoulders and tying it around his waist. He would go to the kitchen in search of sustenance, in the hopes that a bite to eat and perhaps a drink would help rid him of his devilish insomnia.

He dropped the watch into his pocket, for he never went anywhere without it, picked up the candle by the small hook on the edge of the holder, and tiptoed out into the corridor. Though his room was quite a distance from either the Earl's or the Countess', he was always careful not to make too much noise and wake them.

The stairs down which he slipped were covered in a heavily patterned rug, quite at odds with the dark, wood-clad walls that were rather out of fashion but that Uncle Mason loved. They ended in the entrance hall, which was similarly carpeted and equally as dark, but there was something about it Edward had always liked.

There was a fireplace that faced the front door, still gently flickering, above which was a grand portrait of the Earl himself, framed in ormolu. Next to it, there stood the grandfather clock that chimed loud enough to be heard through the whole house, and next to that were some simple wooden chairs for those who were required to wait for attention.

Each perpendicular wall was lined with more grand portraits, similarly framed. Once, as a boy, Edward would have been able to name each and every ancestor on show, but he had long since forgotten and found he wasn't that bothered.

He would never become an earl himself, so there was no reason for him to know such things. Between each portrait, there were candle holders secured to the wall, the candles in which were perpetually lit.

Edward began to cross the great hall, ignoring the door to his right that led to the butler's quarters—his pantry, his office, and a small cloakroom—and paying little attention to the grand doors ahead of him housing the breakfast room and receiving parlor.

Instead, he aimed directly for the small door tucked so neatly into the corner that it was often overlooked, except for when the maids bustled in and out. Through this door, he would find the

kitchens, as well as the servants' quarters, if that took his fancy. It didn't, of course, it never had, but he knew his cousin James wandered down there on occasion.

Just as he was about to twist the doorknob, there came a sharp rapping at the front door. It was so loud in the silence of the night that Edward jumped, causing the flame on his candle to leap and gutter before extinguishing completely.

"Blasted thing," he muttered before turning and scuttling across the floor to the door.

While the entrance hall was always well lit, he would have to relight the candle to progress into the kitchen. Oddly, he hadn't given much thought to the strange, late-night visitor, until there came another rap, this time louder and more forceful.

“I’m coming,” he called, thinking it only fair he answered the door himself, instead of waking the butler. There was no point in both of them losing sleep.

He placed his candle holder down on a small side table, pulled his banyan closer around him, and went to open the door. Again, another rap.

“Open up!”

Edward took a step back and stared at the door in horror. The raspy, angry voice sounded like that of his cousin, and worse—he sounded drunk. Edward sighed. Aunt Eugenia would somehow find a way to blame him for this.

He pulled back the bolt, flipped the latch, and slowly opened the door, peering around it cautiously. He was right; it was James, and he

had taken so much alcohol he could barely stand.

“About time,” James snarled, pushing the door further open and staggering in, held up with the aid of his friend, Lord Humphrey Berkeley. “It’s positively freezing out here.”

“It is the middle of the night,” Edward snapped. “That’s what happens when the sun goes down, or did you not realize that?”

Together, Humphrey and James stumbled over to the chairs, where the former positively dumped the latter in a heap of drunken mess. Edward watched in morbid horror. He couldn’t begin to imagine why anyone would want to get themselves in such a state.

“You’re getting far too heavy for my aid,” Lord Berkeley said with a raised eyebrow.

“And you’re getting far too weak,” James retorted.

Lord Berkeley tutted but essentially ignored James, turning to smile apologetically at Edward.

“Good evening, Mr. Lancaster,” he said. “Please accept my apologies for returning your cousin in this state.” He looked over his shoulder and frowned. “It was not my intention.”

“Lord Berkeley—”

“No, no!” James interrupted, slumped in his seat but his arm waving frantically in the air. “Not *Berkeley*. Haven’t you heard, dear cousin of mine? It’s Lord *Somerset*, now. He’s an earl.”

He spread the word *earl* out like butter across toast, his mouth wide as he took care in his pronunciation in a vain attempt to avoid

the inevitable slurring.

“Enough now, James,” Lord Somerset said before turning back to Edward. “Again, I must apologize. He’s rather a law unto himself when he gets going, as I’m sure you know.”

He chuckled, and Edward stared back in surprise.

“I . . .” He blew the air from his mouth, puffing out his cheeks. “Congratulations on receiving your title, my lord.”

“Yes, well,” Lord Somerset said, looking everywhere but at Edward. “The less said about that for the moment, the better.”

“Would you like to come inside for a drink?” Edward asked, feeling suddenly terribly uncomfortable there in his nightclothes, while these two noblemen remained well dressed and perfectly

pristine, despite James' inebriation.

"That's a most kind offer," Lord Somerset said. "But I really must be getting home. It's late. Again, apologies for the disturbance."

"No," Edward said, shaking his head. "Not at all, my lord. If anything, we must thank you for ensuring he was returned home safely and without fuss."

Lord Somerset snorted as he made his way to the front door. "Without fuss might be a bit of an exaggeration," he said. "James, I'll talk to you once you've slept it off. Goodnight, Mr. Lancaster."

"Goodnight, Lord Somerset."

Edward shut the door behind him, leaning against it for a brief second, gathering the energy to deal with James.

“I’ll take that drink,” James slurred from his seat.

Edward turned and glowered at him. “Don’t you think you’ve had quite enough?” he asked.

James snorted, his lips pushed together. “Is there such a thing as enough?”

James and Edward, both being Lancaster men, looked remarkably alike, though James was two years Edward’s senior. That’s about where the similarities ended, however. Where Edward was kind and thoughtful, with a keen desire to learn and progress in life, James wanted nothing more than an easy ride, and Edward knew for a fact he had a penchant for the less than proper pastimes and engagements.

“Come,” Edward said, leaning down to loop James’ left arm over

his shoulder. "Let's get you upstairs."

"But that's not where the brandy is," James said, looking almost childlike in his pleading as he looked at Edward.

"I'm afraid there's no brandy left," Edward ventured. "You have drunk it all already."

James blew the air out of his mouth through closed lips. "No brandy left! There are whole barrels of it in the cellar."

"Come, James," Edward said, still bent double and cursing his misfortune for having stepped out of his room when he did. "It's time for bed."

"Oh, all right," James said with a sigh, putting his weight heavily on the arm of the chair to push himself up. "I suppose I do feel a trifle

squiffy.”

“A trifle indeed,” Edward said, straightening up and walking James to the stairs. “Take hold of the bannister.”

James did as he was told and, slowly but surely, they mounted the stairs, taking the steps one at a time.

“My father prefers you to me, you know,” James said as they rounded the landing.

Edward wasn’t sure what he heard most in those words—the hateful hiss or the self-pitying whine. He didn’t like the sound of either, but the truth was, James was probably right. Edward knew for certain that the Earl did not approve of James’ recent behavior.

“Nonsense,” he replied with a furrowed brow. “You’re his son.

He prefers no one over you.”

But he'd like you a lot better if you behaved yourself.

They hobbled together across the landing, James grasping hold of the wall as Edward grasped hold of him.

“You don’t know anything,” James slurred, his lips twisted into a snarl.

“Be quiet,” Edward warned. “Or you’ll wake your mother and father.”

“Really?” James turned to look at him with an amused expression then called out, “Mother! Oh, Mother dear!”

“Stop it!” Edward snapped to James’ mischievous sneer.

The Countess’ door swung open and she burst out, wearing a white nightgown, with her hair in curlers and a glare like Edward had never seen upon her face.

“What is going on here?” she growled, directing the full force of her anger at Edward, not at James where it truly belonged.

“Aunt Eugenia,” Edward said with a sigh.

“What have you done to my baby?”

“I . . . I . . .have done nothing,” Edward stuttered. “He just arrived home drunk. Lord Somerset brought him.

James dragged himself across the hall, and he fell against the couch, chuckling to himself. Edward glanced at him and then back to his aunt.

“This is that Somerset boy’s fault,” she said. “A bad influence on my boy.” Then she thrust a finger in his direction. “And why haven’t you taken my boy to his chambers to rest? What good are you if you can’t even take care of your kin?”

Edward’s mouth fell open and he staggered back, reaching out for the wall in surprise. If anyone was a bad influence, it was James, and though he was used to Aunt Eugenia’s favoritism, her blindness consistently astounded him.

“You are completely useless, Edward Lancaster, and while my husband may stand for it, I will not.”

“But I—”

“Do not make excuses. After everything we have done for you, taking you in, supporting you, this is how you repay us.”

“Please, Aunt—”

“Get my son to bed and ensure he is well by morning. That’s an order.”

“Yes, Aunt Eugenia,” Edward said, lowering his eyes to the floor. He’d long ago learned that arguing with her got him nowhere. “Please accept my apologies for disturbing you.”

That was the best he could manage, even though he knew he should offer a false apology for whatever she thought he’d done. He wouldn’t allow himself to take the blame for anything.

She glared at him, her eyes tracing his body up and down as her lips were pursed, clearly trying to decide whether to let him go or not.

“Very well,” she said, then spun around and marched back into her room.

Edward closed his eyes and sighed with relief before returning his attention to James.

“You heard your mother,” he said firmly. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“Always such a good boy,” James sniggered, but he clambered out of his seat and staggered down the hallway towards his room all the same.

Edward watched him, and once he saw the door closed behind him, he returned to his own room. He was suddenly exhausted, desperate to sleep, his insomnia cured.

As he fell back onto his bed, looking out once again at the moon, he thought of how James would cope once he became an earl. He wasn't the best choice, everyone knew that, but the only other eligible heir was Edward himself, and that was an idea he most definitely was not fond of.

Chapter 4

“That’s it for today, girls,” Angela said to a chorus of moans and pleads. She smiled down at her pupils and gently closed the book, the leather binding thumping against the soft, thin pages.

“Just one more chapter?” Rachel asked, bright hope in her young eyes.

“But time’s up, I’m afraid.”

“Time is too short!” Agnes said with a pout.

Angela laughed. “Indeed—something often lauded as the curse of mankind, too short a time on this plain. And alas, we must succumb to it, also.”

She perched on the gray stone edge of the fountain in the village square, the water pattering into the pond behind her. It was a small square that housed a market on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and it was surrounded by a small number of shops. There was the apothecary, the milliner, the dressmaker and tailor. But it was the bookseller that was Angela's very favorite.

It was late that Thursday afternoon, the sun high in the sky, and she looked at the young girls in front of her, each in their summer bonnets, each with rosy cheeks. They wore a mishmash of gowns, some in better condition than others, but all, it seemed, in various shades of puce and gray—practical, Angela thought, if not pretty. She couldn't imagine these young girls had a lot of choice.

Angela herself wore a lemon-yellow gown, delicately embroidered around the hem with summer flowers. Her bonnet, made of straw, was adorned with a matching ribbon, and over her wrist dangled a small yellow reticule. She placed the book in her lap then

rested her elbows on her knees, leaning forward.

“Are you enjoying the book, at least?” she asked those eager faces, the ones still silently begging her to continue. She knew that feeling all too well—she had burned out many a candle by staying up far too late, her nose buried in a book, because she couldn’t resist just one more chapter.

“Yes!” they shouted in unison, before breaking into giggles.

“I’m glad,” Angela said. Instilling a love of reading in these girls gave her a sense of pride, of accomplishment.

“Please, can we read some more?”

“Oh, Maggie,” Angela said, looking down at her young charge. “I can’t keep you any longer, no matter how much I wish it. Your mother

will be here to collect you soon, and I'm certain she'll have plans for you this afternoon."

"But I don't want to go back and do chores," Maggie moaned, her bottom lip stuck out in a pout.

"No," Angela chuckled. "I don't suppose you do."

"And I want to know what happens next," Helen cried.

"Ah, but a little absence and anticipation will make the reveal all the better, don't you think?" Angela said.

"If only she had some patience," Jill said, throwing Helen a look. She was one of the older girls, and definitely the most spirited. She would grow to be as fierce and unwavering as Lydia, Angela often thought.

“Patience will come as she grows,” Angela reassured her.

They were common girls Angela had gathered from the village—six of them in total, though occasionally another couple joined them. They all held a copy of the book they were reading together, paid for by the Dorset estate, and with Angela, they had gone from being entirely illiterate to reading classic works of fiction in just a few months.

They met once a week—usually outdoors when the sun was shining—and while Angela read a page or two, she allowed each of the girls to take a turn, helping them only when they stumbled over their words. She had always believed that true learning was found in *doing* rather than simply being told.

It was something she had longed to do, both to give something back to the community and to help these less fortunate girls make

something of themselves. Perhaps, she secretly hoped, they would become governesses instead of maids or cooks, and she always thought that if she could get through to just one of them, her time would have been well spent.

Her venture into teaching had turned out very well indeed, and as it happened, it had become about more than teaching alone. Angela had fallen in love with each of the children, and both she and the girls eagerly awaited the next session each and every week. It had become Angela's most prized passion, and it filled her with pride to see just how well the girls were progressing.

When they saw Angela was not going to change her mind, they each slipped their ribbons into their books and closed them, before the chatter began. It happened as it always did after their reading—the girls were eager to know more about Angela's life.

“Is it true you're going to London soon?” little Agnes shouted

from the back. She was the youngest of Angela's pupils, being just six years old but already quick and bright. She was a clever little thing, but her mother said she was as mischievous as she was intelligent.

"It is indeed true," Angela said, cocking her head. "And I'm very much looking forward to it.

"Will you attend lots of balls?" Nellie asked.

"A few, I should hope," Angela replied with a chuckle.

"Assuming I receive invitations, of course."

"I bet you look like a princess in your ball gown," Maggie said wistfully.

"She already looks like a princess," Agnes cried.

“What’s it like, Lady Angela?” Rachel asked. “The season in London?”

“Well,” Angela said, leaning forward. “I can only tell you what I’ve heard, because this will be my first ever time. But from what I hear, it’s magical, full of dancing and romance.”

“Will there be lots of gentlemen?” Jill asked, causing a rupture of giggles from the girls. The very mention of the opposite sex always had them in bits.

“There will be many gentlemen, I’m certain of it.”

“And will you dance with any of them?” Maggie asked.

“I should hope so,” Angela replied. “I have been practicing with my sister all winter!”

“And what of the ladies? Will they all be beautiful?”

“Will you have a chance to take tea with them?”

“Some will be beautiful, I am sure. Others, perhaps not,” Angela replied with a giggle. “And of course we will take tea. Socializing is one of the most important aspects of the season. One must *meet and greet* as my sister says. It’s as beneficial for business as it is for us personally.”

“Will Lady Lydia be attending with you?” Maggie asked.

“She most certainly will. She is to be my unofficial chaperone.”

“Unofficial?” Agnes looked up at Angela quite confused.

“Lady Lydia is as yet unmarried,” Angela explained. “So, though she will be accompanying me, my official chaperone shall be our dear friend, Lady Maria.”

“Why hasn’t Lady Lydia got a husband?” Agnes asked with a sweet and pure innocence.

“Agnes! That’s a rude question,” Jill said.

Angela chuckled. “That’s quite all right. Poor Lydia has so much pressure at the moment. What with our father’s death and William not yet of age, she is running the estate. It’s a lot of work.”

And she's too frightened to let herself go.

“But she's so beautiful,” Agnes cried, as if Lydia's pain were her own pain. “I would have thought many gentlemen would have proposed marriage by now.”

“And she's the nicest person in the whole world,” Maggie said.
“Apart from you, of course, Lady Angela.”

“She visited my uncle when he was sick,” Nellie said. “*And* she paid for the physician.”

“She gave my mother a basket of fruit after she gave birth to my brother,” Helen said.

“I should hope to be like Lady Lydia when I grow up,” Jill said.
“She is beautiful inside and out.”

Listening to the children's words made Angela's heart swell with pride, and she wished, so very much, that Lydia was there to hear it, too. As much as she hid it deep inside, Angela could see Lydia's lack of confidence as clearly as she could see her roll her eyes whenever Angela mentioned it.

"I shall pass on your kind words," Angela said.

She looked up and spotted the girls' mothers walking over, hesitant so as not to disturb the lesson. Angela got to her feet to indicate to them that she was finished and smiled broadly.

"Good afternoon, Lady Angela," Mrs. Jenkins, Jill's mother, said. She held a coin out. "Please, accept this token. I know it's not much, but you deserve payment for all you do for the girls."

“Nonsense,” Angela said, cupping the woman’s hand around the coin and pushing it back towards her. “I do it for the love of it, not for the money.”

“We all appreciate it so much, m’lady,” Mrs. Adams said. “And my Maggie is always in bits waiting for the next lesson.”

“Here,” Mrs. Beecham said, holding out a small cardboard box. “They’re honey cakes, freshly baked. Agnes helped me this morning.”

“That’s really most kind,” Angela said, gratefully taking the cakes. She would not accept payment, but even she couldn’t resist the call of honey cakes. Besides, they had been baked especially for her. It would have been rude to decline them.

“Come on then, Helen,” Mrs. Farmer said, holding a hand out to her daughter.

“Oh, before you go,” Angela called, the box of cakes in one hand and a finger from the other in the air.

Mrs. Farmer turned around and smiled. “I hope everything is all right,” she said.

“Oh, yes,” Angela said. “Actually, this is for all of you.” She waited until she had the full attention of the mothers and girls alike. “As you know, I am traveling to London in a few weeks’ time, to attend the season.”

“She’s going to many balls,” Agnes said, looking up at her mother with wide-eyed awe.

Angela giggled. “Hopefully, yes,” she said. “Though I know it’s still a while to go, I don’t want my attention too diverted—it is my

debut, after all. So, this will be the last lesson until after the summer.”

She looked down at the sad faces, all mid-moan, and she smiled at them.

“I know, I know,” she said. “But you have all done so well recently. You deserve a break.”

“Thank you again,” Mrs. Jenkins said, putting a guiding hand on Jill’s shoulder.

“I tell you what,” Angela said, bright with the sudden idea. “Why don’t you all try to get to the end of the book on your own? Then, when I return, we can have a discussion about it and see how well you did. The practice will really do you good, and it means we’ll be able to start a new book in the autumn.”

“Oh, can we really?” Maggie asked. “I’ll read the whole thing tonight!”

“No, you won’t,” her mother said, shooting her a warning glance. “You’ll need that to keep you occupied throughout the summer. And besides, there’s housework to be done today.”

“Your mother is right, Maggie. Take your time and you’ll enjoy it much more.”

“Will you write?” Nellie asked. “Please?”

“Yes!” Rachel cried. “And tell us all about London and the balls and the ladies and every single thing that happens?”

“Well, maybe not *everything*,” Mrs. Adams replied, looking worried at the thought of what adult content there might be.

Angela laughed again. “Of course. I will write to each and every one of you, and I will tell you everything that is appropriate.” She glanced up at Mrs. Adams with a smile, silently reassuring her. “But only if you all promise to read the letters yourself—you’re not to ask anyone else to read them for you, for you need the practice!”

The girls all promised and then skipped away happily with their mothers. Angela watched them go, the box of cakes held against her stomach, and then she turned to walk home, content with everything she had in her life.

Chapter 5

“Very well,” Gregory said. “You win. I can’t say I’ve missed being thrashed by you so often, Lancaster.”

Edward laughed. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, old friend. You put up quite a challenge today. I suspect you’ve been practicing.”

Edward picked up the hand towel and wiped at the sweat across his forehead. He had not intended to partake in any form of exercise whatsoever when he left the house that morning. He was simply visiting some old friends. But when Gregory Appleton, third son of the Duke of Cromwell, had suggested a little fencing and had even offered to lend him some suitable clothing, Edward couldn’t resist.

And he’d won, as was his habit.

“How about a nice refreshing glass of lemonade to cool you down before you go shooting off?” Gregory suggested.

“Sounds delightful,” Edward said—and truly, too—as he took his seat at the garden table.

Beneath the clear glass top, Edward could see the detailed ironwork, painted white, depicting flowers and leaves. It was, he thought, the perfect summer table indeed. Gregory clicked his fingers and spoke quickly and quietly to the maid.

“So, tell me,” he said when he returned his attention to Edward.

“How was Oxford?”

“University was wonderful,” Edward said, leaning back in his chair. “Quite the most impressive library I have ever seen—and should ever hope to see, I’d imagine. As a place of learning, it was truly

inspiring, and I would advise anyone to study there, given the opportunity.”

“Yes, yes,” Gregory said, waving a hand in the air. “All that’s just lovely. Very proper and absolutely the right answer you give to the great aunt or potential mother-in-law who asks you such a question in the corner of a ball. What I wanted to know is how *Oxford* was?”

“As a place? Beautiful architecture,” Edward said, his lips twisting into a teasing smile. “And really, the history is something else.”

“You know full well what I mean, Edward Lancaster! You are being quite the brute, teasing me like this. I want to know about the taverns, the gentlemen’s clubs, perhaps even the ladies!”

He raised an eyebrow, an action that had Edward guffawing.

“You are a rotter sometimes, Gregory, you know that?” He looked up as the maid deposited an ice-cold glass of lemonade in front of him. “Thank you,” he said, offering her a polite smile.

He picked up his glass and took a long gulp, the liquid cooling his throat and spreading out over his body. There was something truly delightful about a cold glass of lemonade on a hot day, especially when one had been exerting oneself, and he put the glass back down with a satisfied gasp.

“Not a rotter at all,” Gregory replied. “You forget that I haven’t had quite the life of adventure as you have. Not ever having left the confines of the Cromwell estate for any substantial amount of time, it’s only natural I should wish to live vicariously through others. You seem like a good enough choice.”

“I’m not, believe me,” Edward said with a chuckle. “I may have

gone away to study, but a life of adventure I have not. There really aren't many exciting things to tell."

"If not the taverns, then tell me, do you have a sweetheart tucked away in that part of England? Perhaps one to whom you have promised marriage?"

"No, not that either," Edward said simply. "I truly was only interested in my studies. There is plenty of time for romance later. I wish to get my career off the ground first, actually have some means of supporting a lady, should that time come."

"Heavens, is that really all you did with your time in Oxford? Read books?"

Edward shrugged, but happily. His friend might mock, but Edward knew full well how honorable and conscientious Gregory

could be. He would have done exactly the same thing, in Edward's position.

"It's true, I'm afraid. I have no debauched tales to tell you. I'm the good one in the family, remember?"

"Ah yes, I remember it far too well," Gregory said, looking down at his glass. "How is the future earl? Still his usual self?"

"James will never change," Edward replied. "Such a shame, really. He had so much potential to do good with the world—or certainly his little part of it."

"I shudder to think how many so-called noblemen lack any true nobility at all. I'm afraid most men of privilege are simply not as honorable as you or I," Gregory said.

“I will admit that I am glad I do not have a title to inherit. But I tell you this now, if I *did*, I would take it deathly seriously. Uncle Mason has taught me a lot, even if James constantly dismissed his positive influence.”

“Indeed. Your uncle is one of the good ones.”

Together, they whiled away the afternoon, talking about the years past and putting the future of the world to rights. Edward thoroughly enjoyed it, remembering how much he had loved Gregory’s company, even before he left for Oxford. It made a pleasant change to talk to someone in such an adult, rational manner. Even many of the fellows at university couldn’t quite manage that.

By the end of the afternoon, they had caught up on just about everything, and they had discussed politics and religion and family and romance. Edward left feeling good—he’d exercised both his body and his mind, and he’d reconnected to his home village and to his old

friend.

“Come visit again soon, won’t you?” Gregory said as he showed Edward to the door.

“You’d have a job to stop me,” Edward said, grasping hold of Gregory’s hand and shaking it firmly.

When he got out onto the gravel driveway, he paused and raised his face to the sun, letting the warmth soak further into him.

“Isn’t it such a beautiful day, Charlie?” he said, turning to the coachman.

A part of him was reluctant to get inside, preferring to walk instead. But it would be a shame to waste the use of such magnificent horses. He had forgotten what it was like traveling in style, having

gotten used to walking everywhere in Oxford. He would use the coach as often as his uncle permitted. Perhaps he would save up to purchase an open carriage for days like this.

“It is, Mr. Lancaster,” Charlie replied, stood perfectly still next to the open door, his hands clasped behind his back. “Though many of the roads are muddy today, thanks to all that rain we had yesterday.”

Edward chuckled. “It’s a good thing we’re in a coach and not on foot, then, after all. I wouldn’t want to end up in some mucky puddle, and knowing my luck, that’s just what would happen.”

“Indeed not, Mr. Lancaster.”

Edward climbed into the coach and sat back, sighing happily as he looked out of the window. He had missed the area, he had to admit it, and it felt good to be back. It had been a good day, all round. He

had taken numerous cups of tea in several different parlors before ending up with Gregory.

Life was going just about as Edward had hoped. Admittedly, he sometimes had issues with James and with Aunt Eugenia, but they were few and far between, and everything else really was going swimmingly. He had good friends, he was close with his uncle, he had great career prospects, and the sun was shining brightly. There was nothing that could derail him from his future.

As the coach trundled through the streets, slow enough for Edward to enjoy the scenery around him, he delighted in seeing the muddy puddles splash up around the wheels, hearing the sloshing sound as they went.

It was a lovely day, and quiet, too. Even halfway home, Edward realized he hadn't seen a single person on the streets. It felt as though he had the world all to himself, and he was buoyed to take the world

on. That's when, up ahead, he spotted a young woman—a commoner, no doubt, to be walking the streets quite alone.

He couldn't see the front of her, of course, but from the back he thought her very beautiful indeed. Despite her lowly position, her hair was wound up so prettily, the yellow of it reflecting the sun's rays and matching that of her gown.

He thought to turn and catch a glimpse of her face as they passed, and so he paid close attention to the window. What happened next, however, was most unfortunate. Just as the coach came level with the lady, they traveled through a rather large and rather muddy puddle.

The wheels kicked up the dirty water, showering the poor thing completely. She let out a shriek and dropped whatever it was she was holding, stopped stock still and scowling.

“Stop the coach!” cried Edward.

Charlie did as he was asked, pulling back on the reins until the horses slowed to a stop, the coach just behind them. Edward didn’t wait for the coachman to open the door for him, but rather threw it open himself and scampered down the steps.

“Are you all right?” he asked in a mad panic. She had not moved, but for her mouth falling open in shock and an anger rising in her eyes.

“Do I *look* like I am all right?” she demanded, turning her glare upon him.

He scrunched his face up, embarrassed, and he shrugged. Her gown was soaked through and splashed all over with mud. She held her arms out in front of her as though to let them drop would be to

dirty them, too. She even had splatters of mud across her perfectly smooth white cheeks.

“I’m dreadfully sorry,” he said. “That was—”

“Is your driver completely blind?” she snapped. “Can he not see where he is going?”

“It’s been awfully muddy,” Edward began, a little awkwardly. “What with the rain yesterday and . . .”

He trailed off, seeing perfectly clearly that his explanation was getting him nowhere.

“The rain is no excuse for poor driving,” she said. She lifted the skirts of her gown and stared down at them, her expression a mix of horror and sadness. “My beautiful gown. It’s perfectly ruined!”

“No,” Edward said quickly, holding his hands out as though to calm her. “No, fret not. I shall pay for you to have it cleaned.”

She glared up at him again, her eyes a fire of fury.

“Or . . . or . . .” he stuttered, blinking and looking frantically around him. “Or I could just buy you a new one,” he said quickly. “Would you like that?”

“What is it with you gentlemen who think you can just buy your way out of anything? Surely you are not fool enough to believe that money can solve everything, are you?”

“I . . . no,” he said, opening his eyes wide. “No, I’m not. I—”

“And what, pray tell, will you do about my ruined cakes?”

“Your ruined what?” he asked, unsure what she was talking about. In response, she merely growled and pointed down at the floor.

“Oh,” he said. For there, in a little puddle of their own, was a cardboard box, quite ripped and ruined. And spilling out of it were what looked like the tastiest honey cakes he’d ever seen.

He met her eyes again, his mouth open and his jaw working as he tried to find the words to say. But it seemed his hesitation only made her angrier.

“Ugh!” she cried, then picked up her wet and dirty skirt, pushed past him, and marched away, her footsteps hammering on the ground in time with her fury.

“Wait,” Edward said, turning and calling out to her, a hand raised in the air. “Please. At least let me give you a lift home, or . . . or . . . to wherever you wish to go!”

But his shouts were to no avail, for the girl—whoever she was—marched on, quite ignoring his words.

Edward sighed, admitting defeat, and walked back to the carriage.

“Home?” Charlie asked, eyebrows raised.

“Please,” Edward said. “And slower this time, if you don’t mind. I don’t wish to upset any more ladies on our way.”

“Course not, sir.”

Edward climbed back into the coach, and as they pulled away from the side of the road, a smile began to form on his face. It grew and grew until it even became a chuckle. The poor woman had looked very silly indeed, her bright yellow gown covered in mud and a splash of it upon her nose.

But, my, when she blushed . . .

Her cheeks had turned beetroot red with frustration and her eyes had shone out like beacons. And there, in that image, Edward recognized true and unwavering beauty.

It was true that he was sorry to have upset her, but he was glad he had got to meet someone so lovely, even if it had only lasted mere minutes.

Chapter 6

Angela marched up the stone steps at the front of the house, landing each foot with a heavy breath and a harsh word, the skirts she still held in her hand swinging back and forth in time.

She slammed the door handle down and pushed her way in, letting the heavy oak door fall closed with a slam. Beaumont came running out of his rooms in surprise, but Angela did not stop, instead marching straight for the stairs ahead.

“Lady Angela?” he called. “Is everything all right? Would you like me to fetch your sister?”

“No, I would not,” she said, still marching ahead and not turning around for Beaumont. “I would like someone to prepare me a bath, and I would like to be left alone!”

“Very well, my lady. I’ll ensure someone prepares a bath right away.”

She could hear the worry in Beaumont’s voice, but she had neither the energy nor the positive feeling to care. She wanted only to clean herself up and forget all about her disastrous walk home. And after such a beautiful afternoon with the girls, as well!

“Ruddy noblemen and their entitled stupidity,” she muttered to herself. “Ruddy coachmen and their inability to see where they are going.”

She really was furious, and though she knew her words and her dark thoughts were probably unfair—he seemed like a perfectly decent, honorable gentleman, after all—she didn’t much care.

She had had to walk over twenty minutes to get the rest of the way home, soaked to the bone and covered head to toe in dirt. It was both shameful and embarrassing, and, quite frankly, uncomfortable. Between the wet gown and the speed at which she'd walked, she had chafed and that had made her even angrier still.

She slammed her chamber door closed and pulled her skirts up over her head, struggling to get out of the gown. She growled in frustration, falling unsteadily onto the bed, a swathe of fabric over her head and seemingly no way out. She slumped down with a huff and blew the mucky fabric away from her face.

“My lady?” Megan asked, poking her head out from behind the wall where the bathing area and the water closet were. “Is everything . . . Oh, my! Here, let me help!”

The lady's maid ran to her distressed mistress and gently pulled the gown from her face.

“Stand up, my lady. It’d help if you’d undone the buttons first.”

“Yes, thank you, Megan,” Angela said through tight lips.

But as Megan slowly undid the gown, slipping Angela’s arms out of the sleeves and letting the yellow fabric fall to the floor, she had a little chuckle.

“It’s not funny,” Angela said as she felt her stays loosening, though she, too, had chuckled a little.

“Of course not, my lady. But you’re in quite a fluster! I believe this bath will do you the world of good.”

“I think you’re right,” Angela said.

Finally naked, though still feeling the grime upon her flesh, she tiptoed towards the bath. It was in a room of its own, with only the roaring fire for company, and as Angela put her toe into the hot water, she instantly began to relax.

She slipped up to the shoulders into the water, lay back, and closed her eyes, letting the misery of the past hour wash away from her.

That's much better.

She let her thoughts drift away, the warmth of the water seeping into her bones and filling her up from her toes. Where her sister thought tea was the solution to everything, Angela was convinced that a bath was the cure for all ills.

By the time she got out of the bath, she knew her dirty clothes would be whisked away, a fresh gown placed on the bed, and she could pretend her inopportune meeting with that supposed gentleman had never happened.

He was handsome though.

At that thought, she opened one eye, as though someone in the room had said the words instead of someone in her mind, and she was trying to spy who had spoken.

When the thought quieted, she closed her eyes again. But as soon as she did, the most curious thing happened. The thought appeared once more!

Even embarrassed, he was handsome.

Both eyes shot open this time and she blinked furiously. She was supposed to be angry at this man, not complimenting him—not even in her thoughts! And besides, what did it matter? It wasn't likely that she would ever see him again.

She didn't even know his name! And if she did have the misfortune of coming across him again, she would be sure to coat *him* in mud instead.

Now, if anything, she was even more irritated. Not only had his driver absolutely soaked her and ruined her cakes, but this gentleman was invading her thoughts quite without invitation!

What a brute. What a purely improper, insensitive brute! A gentleman in name only, for no real gentleman would insert himself into a lady's thoughts unbidden.

Yes, but those eyes . . .

She growled in frustration, blaming the poor unsuspecting gentleman, even though it was her own mind that was betraying her, and she rang the bell next to the bath to summon Megan.

It was Mrs. Beaumont who arrived, though, carrying a large white sheet towel, held open and ready to wrap around Angela.

“Where is Megan?” she asked, frowning at the housekeeper.

“Otherwise disposed,” Mrs. Beaumont explained. “I didn’t realize you were taking a bath, my lady, otherwise I would never have set her upon another task. But no bother, I’m here to help.”

“Thank you,” Angela said, rising and causing the water to cascade from her, splashing back down into the bath.

She stepped out gingerly and Mrs. Beaumont placed the towel around her before turning back into the chambers. Angela followed, her small feet leaving wet prints on the hard floor.

She was right—the dirty clothes had indeed been whisked away — and she was relieved. She didn't want to think of that irritating—*handsome*—man again.

“Here we are, my lady,” Mrs. Beaumont said brightly, laying the dusky pink gown out across the bed. “Let's get you dressed.”

Angela allowed the housekeeper to assist her, toweling her dry then helping her into her stays. And as she did so, she explained everything that had happened.

“I was soaked through!” she cried. “And I lost my cakes.”

Mrs. Beaumont chuckled, though she, at least, had the decency to *try* to stifle it. Angela turned to her and raised an eyebrow, but Mrs. Beaumont only shrugged, a smile still tugging at her lips.

“I don’t mean to laugh, my lady,” she said. “But I can’t help it if it’s funny. And it is. I can just picture your face! And the face of that poor man!”

“*Poor man?* I should think I would be the one you have sympathy for.”

“And I do, my lady,” Mrs. Beaumont said, twisting Angela’s hair into a bun. “But you must admit that it’s a little funny.”

Angela scowled into the looking glass, the pair of them paused in their actions, until both of them broke into giggles.

“Yes, all right,” she admitted. “It’s a *little* funny.”

“You are just like your sister when you are angry,” Mrs. Beaumont said. “So fierce, the pair of you.”

“Where is Lydia, anyway?” Angela asked. “I would have thought she would be interested in what was going on.”

“Ah.” Mrs. Beaumont smiled broadly at Angela’s reflection. “She’s meeting with a new young gentleman.”

“Oh really?” Angela was surprised. She hadn’t heard a thing about any new suitor, nor any new business associate. She had to admit she was intrigued, and most definitely a little hopeful—perhaps this would be the one who made Lydia realize the true potential of love. “What’s his name?”

“I can’t remember,” Mrs. Beaumont said with a deep frown. “You know what my memory is like. Handsome one, though. Tall and dark, with the richest brown eyes I’ve ever seen.”

Angela thought back to the gentlemen she knew and couldn’t think who this new man could possibly be.

“Are they taking tea?” Angela asked.

Mrs. Beaumont shook her head. “They were in her study when I left,” she explained. “It seemed he was asking her for some help or other.”

“Oh,” Angela said, feeling instantly deflated. “A business deal, nothing more, then?”

“That’s what I thought at first,” Mrs. Beaumont said, leaning forward conspiratorially. “She would not see him at first, but when he swore he was not there socially, she allowed him in.”

“And?” Angela asked, eager to know more.

Mrs. Beaumont paused in her pinning and looked up at the ceiling, as though trying to remember. “The thing is,” she said. “I’ve never before seen Lady Lydia look at one of her associates quite in the same way as she looked at this young lord.”

Angela squealed in delight. “Do you think she likes him?”

The housekeeper shrugged nonchalantly. “I couldn’t possibly say,” she said. “But I do believe I saw a glint of something in the young man’s eye, also.”

Angela squealed again, jumping up from her seat. "Thank you, Mrs. Beaumont. You have improved my mood to no end!"

"But I haven't finished your hair," the housekeeper replied in astonishment.

"No need. It's perfect as it is!"

Angela dashed out of the room and down the stairs. She just had to meet this stranger and see for herself whether Mrs. Beaumont was right.

Normally quiet and reserved, Angela felt a bolt of confidence and strength run through her. After what happened to Lydia yesterday with that coward, Henry Twinkle, and then today, to her, with that brute of a man who soaked her through, Angela was in no mood to take any prisoners.

That's why, when she saw the tall and handsome stranger just about to leave the house, she marched right up to him and introduced herself.

“Good afternoon, my lord. I am Lady Angela Stanley, Lady Lydia's sister.”

The man in question was so surprised by her boldness that he turned to her, blinking rapidly and stuttering.

“I-I . . . Good day, my lady,” he said. “Lord Somerset.”

“What exactly are your intentions with my sister?” she blurted out, surprising herself just as much as she surprised him.

“I beg your pardon?”

“My sister, Lady Lydia. You were here to visit her. What are your intentions?”

“Why, I . . . I’m here on a . . . business matter,” he said.

Angela didn’t believe him. There was far too much hesitancy in his answer—he was hiding something. She narrowed her eyes at him.

“I don’t wish to see her hurt.”

Lord Somerset let out a bark of laughter, as if he was quite incredulous. She wasn’t surprised—she couldn’t believe herself.

“Of course not,” he replied with plain and deep sincerity. “I can

assure you, my lady, I am entirely honorable and will treat your sister with such respect as she deserves.”

“I see,” she replied.

Lord Somerset sighed. “I have asked for your sister’s assistance in an important matter,” he said. “I believe her to be an extremely capable young lady, and I am looking for” He paused, evidently reluctant to admit whatever it was he had asked for.

“For what, my lord?”

“For a little tuition in certain matters of business.”

“Oh!” Angela was quite taken aback by that. It was not what she had been expecting at all. “So does that mean we’ll be seeing more of you, then?”

“All being well, yes,” he replied.

Angela couldn't stop the smile from growing, happy that he would be around more often. Perhaps there was a chance for him and Lydia after all.

“Actually, Lady Lydia has requested I attend the season with you,” he admitted a little shyly.

“Really?” Angela furrowed her brow. That didn't sound like Lydia at all.

“To be a companion for your brother. It is what she asked of me in return for her assistance and discretion.”

Ah. That made more sense. Even so, it was peculiar. Lydia was normally so stubborn when it came to such things. She insisted she could do everything alone, even when it was quite clear she needed help. Perhaps Mrs. Beaumont was right when she said she saw the twinkle of something in Lydia's eyes.

And for this gentleman to agree, too. He must either want her assistance very badly, or he desired her time and company. Angela grinned to herself, hoping beyond measure that it was the latter—and thinking it probably was.

“Very well,” she said lightly. “I shall believe you. Good day to you, my lord.”

And with that, she turned and skipped away, happy with his answer—at least for the time being. He gave off the impression that he admired Lydia, at least, and deep down, Angela suspected he found her attractive, too. If asked to explain why she thought that, she

wouldn't know where to begin, but the belief was there all the same.

She decided to make her way to the library. It felt as if the first snatches of love were all around her—for Lydia and Lord Somerset, but also for her. She did not have a beau, of course, not even the hint of one on the horizon.

But still, in her heart and in her veins, she felt awash with the potential for romance, so close she could almost reach out and grab it.

How strange, she thought, though not too deeply, preferring instead to laugh it off and embrace the sensation.

Angela's debut, her very first season, was fast approaching, and despite reminding herself not to get her hopes up, she couldn't help but wonder whether she would find love in London.

The very idea of it sent an enticing shiver down her spine, and she thought of what her future husband might look like. Green eyes, she thought, like emeralds. And hair that was neither too dark nor too light. Tall and strong, a man who carries himself well.

A man, she thought, not too unlike the one I met earlier today.

Chapter 7

“I know it’s a lot to ask, Edward, my dear boy,” Uncle Mason said.

He waved the brandy decanter in Edward’s direction, but Edward shook his head. He was in no mood for drinking. It was far too early in the day and he preferred to keep his head clear and calm. And if watching James over the past few years had taught him anything, it was that too much alcohol rarely made one a better person.

“I’m not a fan of London,” Edward said with a sigh. “Especially during the season. All that pomp and ceremony—it’s never appealed to me.”

“I understand perfectly what you mean,” Mason replied as he retook his seat. It was late at night, and the only light came from the

flickering candles and the gently roaring fire.

“It always seemed to me that there were far too many rules of communication,” he continued. “Back in the days when I attended the season, I used to be terrified to speak, for fear I would say the wrong thing to the wrong person. Or worse! Accidentally introduce myself to someone I shouldn’t.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Edward said. “As fascinating as London itself can be, the season is far too rigid. It seems all anyone there wants to talk about is marriage and raising their social ranks. I find it terminally dull.”

The Earl had called Edward to his study in order to discuss this very thing—attending the season which was already in full swing. Mason wanted James to go to London in search of a wife, and he wanted Edward to accompany him as a keeper of sorts, someone there to ensure James didn’t get himself into too much trouble.

In truth, Edward had suspected something like this was coming. He knew his uncle would not put up with James' behavior for much longer, and marriage was a known method of tamping down one's wildness. Or so Edward had heard.

As for himself, marriage was not something he had truly considered. He was not particularly opposed to the idea, but nor was he particularly keen. He'd always assumed that if and when he did marry, it would happen in the same way his father's marriage had, and not the way Mason and Eugenia's had. He would marry for love and no other reason.

He supposed, though, that it was different for him. He had no title and was not officially a member of nobility, although he was as close as he could get. He was just a man, and already a respectable one. He had no need to marry just to uphold his family name.

For James, it wasn't that simple. Already a viscount and one day to become an earl, he had a duty to uphold—and he would need heirs of his own, too. Legitimate ones. He couldn't rightly continue as he was, a man refusing to let go of his younger years and causing trouble.

“As I stated before,” the Earl continued, “it is of the utmost importance that we find James a suitable woman for marriage. There will be many young ladies in London that come from respectable homes for him to choose from. Please help guide him in choosing a proper woman.”

“It seemed likely that this conversation would be had, but why now, dear uncle?” Edward asked.

Mason looked dreadfully tired. Though this task meant he could not spend the summer as he wished, he already knew he would do it, if only to help his dear uncle.

“I might as well come straight out and say it—I’ve confessed to James how doubtful I am about his ability to run the Earldom when I’m gone. I have been hearing about his business dealings as well in regards to the Brighton estate and I fear my confidence in his ability is waning.”

Edward was not surprised by his uncle’s frankness. It was something that came naturally to him, and it was something Edward had always respected him for. There was nothing worse, in his opinion, than someone who was not open and honest about what they felt and thought. It only ever led to trouble and confusion.

“And how did he take it?”

“Better than I expected, actually,” Mason said with a nod of approval. “He even agreed with me. The boy knows his own faults, at least.”

“So you advised him to find a wife?” Edward asked.

“Not just any wife,” the Earl said. “But one capable of running the estate and willing to do so, while he wastes his life doing whatever it is he does. She must be discrete, too, though I am well aware it will come as no surprise to anyone just how useless my son is. Her first task will have to be helping him to clean up any issues at Brighton estate. I have not personally looked at the records because I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but I grow increasingly worried for his future.”

“Women like that are few and far between,” Edward said.

To find a strong, capable woman who would be willing to be saddled with James was quite the challenge. Edward felt sorry for her already. It was a terrible fate, and he wondered how they would ever find someone happy to take James on. He supposed the best way would be to find a woman of lower social standing, whose family

would see marrying an earl as a step up, even if that earl was James. The daughter of a baron, perhaps, or even one of a successful businessman.

“Perhaps he will change when he is married,” Edward suggested, though not with much conviction. “Perhaps his husbandly duties and the wrath of his wife might make him see the error of his ways.”

His uncle snorted with laughter. “Do you really think so?”

“No,” he admitted with a chuckle. “But one can dream.”

Mason sighed. “I truly despair of him sometimes,” he said. “He has such potential to become a good man, and he is throwing it all away.”

“What if he refuses?” Edward asked, the question popping into

his head abruptly. He hadn't considered that up until now, but it was a good question. James had a habit of not doing as his father wished.

"He won't refuse." The darkness in his uncle's tone made Edward cock his head in question, and Mason sighed once more. "I've warned him that if he doesn't find a wife during this season, he will be disinherited."

"Is that possible? But that would mean—"

"Yes, dear boy. It would mean my own son would no longer have his estate or financial standing from me. Although his title would be contested in the courts."

Edward sat back and raised his eyes to the ceiling, letting out an anxious breath. If James was truly disinherited, Edward himself would become the heir presumptive to the Earl of Nordshire even though he

was not his cousin's brother as law required, and as dearly as he loved his uncle, that was not something he had ever wanted for himself.

“You’ll go with him, then?” Mason asked hopefully. “Keep him on the straight and narrow, as they say?”

“Yes, I’ll go with him,” Edward replied. “And I will make sure he finds himself a wife.

* * *

Edward threw James a hard look as he affected a loud, exaggerated yawn.

“There is no need to be so blatantly rude, cousin,” Edward hissed. James rolled his eyes.

“But you’re such a bore! Really, in the whole of London, the very best thing you can think to do is visit a museum?”

Edward turned and scowled at him. They’d already had one woman look them up and down disapprovingly, and Edward was in no doubt that others would follow suit shortly. The exhibition hall was in a large, open room with a high ceiling, and James’ voice carried to every corner of it.

“If you don’t like it, leave,” he said through clenched teeth. They’d been in London only for a few hours, and already they were bickering.

James shrugged. “It’s just, I can think of so many better ways to spend my time. There are taverns here in the city, you know? Much better ones than those at home. And there’s a common girl I know that lives not far from here—she’s always a safe bet for a good time. I’d

wager I could even persuade her to give you a service, if you fancied it.”

“You are disgusting, James Lancaster,” Edward said dryly, not looking at his cousin but instead, admiring a painting on the wall.

“And you are dull. You don’t have to do what *Uncle Mason* says all the time, you know. You are allowed a little fun. You’re a red blooded male, after all, aren’t you?”

“Your *father*,” Edward said pointedly, “is quite correct in what he says. And though it may come as a surprise to you, not everyone enjoys behaving like a rake or partaking in what can only be described as debauchery.”

“You see, just as I said—boring. Perhaps you should become a devout man of the cloth,” James said with a chuckle.

Edward shook his head and chose not to respond, instead moving along to the next room of the museum, his head held high and his hands clasped behind his back. His shoes clipped loudly on the wooden floor, and Edward, for some reason, found he rather liked that. It gave him a sense of presence.

He'd always had an interest in history, and he found it quite fascinating to look at all the artifacts they'd found from hundreds of years earlier. The lives of those people must have been so different, and yet they were so similar in remarkable ways. Love, Edward thought, and hate, have always existed in the same guises, even if methods of cookery or business have progressed.

"You said you wanted to come," he said after a while, his eyes flicking briefly to James who was, in turn, pulling faces.

"I did not say that," James replied simply, one step behind

Edward and talking over his shoulder, like a child. “I said I would go along with whatever you wanted to do, since you are so determined not to let me out of your sight.”

“Same thing,” Edward said.

“No. One is desire, the other is resignation. And anyway, it’s only one night. Tomorrow, we shall attend the first ball of the season, and then I have no doubt we will be inundated with invitations to social events all over the city.”

“What makes you so sure anyone will want to invite you to anything?” Edward asked, a single eyebrow raised, but with his lips twisting into a tease. He didn’t want to spend the entire summer haranguing his cousin. They could, at least, have a little fun.

“Because everyone knows just how lucky they would be to have

me at their party—I bring these events alive.”

Edward snorted. “If you say so. I’d suggest they’re more likely after some scandalous gossip or other.”

James shrugged. “If that’s what the ton wants, then that’s what I shall give them.”

“I’m not convinced that telling your sordid tales will help you find a wife.”

“What difference will it make?” James asked. “They’re all talking about me already.”

“And there’s no need to fan the flames.”

“My dalliances are amusing even to the most prudish of society members,” James said. “Did I tell you about that one girl I met at Dockside a few months back? Jenny, her name was. Or Jinny. Or Jemma. I can’t recall, but it doesn’t matter much.”

“Please don’t tell me the details,” Edward said, suddenly overcome with the notion that James was about to blurt out personal details.

“A maid, she was. Probably still is, I suppose. I convinced her of all sorts—it was such fun.”

Edward couldn’t deny he was intrigued, and he turned to look at James. “Such as?”

“That I loved her,” he said. “That one day, I would marry her, and she would become a countess when my father died.” He snorted

loudly, the sound ringing out through the museum. “I mean, can you imagine anything more ridiculous? Although the look on my father’s face when I turned up with a maid as my wife would almost be worth it.”

Edward stared at him open-mouthed for a long moment, not quite believing what he’d heard. “You can’t be serious?”

“That’s not even the best bit,” chortled James. “Julia . . . or was it June? She thought she was pregnant! She wasn’t, luckily. I don’t know how I would have explained such a large sum to my father.”

“Large sum?” Edward crumpled his brow in confusion.

“Of money, of course.” He looked as confused as Edward, as if Edward should know what he was talking about, but he eventually explained. “To pay the girl off, naturally! As it happened, I didn’t need

to. Saved myself a ton of cash and got rid of the girl in one fell swoop. She was beginning to get rather too attached, if you get my meaning.”

He laughed, nudging Edward’s arm playfully, as though this was all some great joke that Edward would get involved in. He did *try* to laugh, but secretly, he was scandalized.

That poor girl!

Edward found himself wondering, yet again, how James had turned out like this. Uncle Mason was such a good, honorable, upstanding man. He worked hard and cared for others, and he always fulfilled his duties.

“I have a theory,” James said, happily chattering on about his exploits. “Women are like horses.”

“Horses? In what way?”

“They’re useful for a time. They’re good workers and they can be beautiful. But they’re dumb creatures who require far too much looking after. Work them until they wear out, I say, and then trade them in for a new one, just as you would at the stables.”

Edward blinked, his expression blank. Every time he thought James could no longer shock him, he went one step further. He sighed. If he was truly honest with himself, he knew where James got it from.

Aunt Eugenia.

Ever since the day he was born, James had been treated like a king. He could do no wrong, always spoiled and always getting what he wanted, no matter what. When his father told him *no*, James would

go to his mother to have the decision rescinded. As a result, he had grown up behaving in exactly the same way.

If there was just one thing Edward knew for certain, it was that he would have his work cut out for him during the season.

Chapter 8

The journey to London for the season was long and arduous, and by the time Angela arrived at Redbrick Hall, the Dorsets' London townhouse, with her sister, she was positively exhausted.

She took a short nap before helping Lydia unpack their trinkets and small delights, the staff doing the bulk of the work. William was due any moment, and Angela was awash with excitement.

"Isn't it just wonderful to be in London?" Angela said, pulling another bonnet from the box.

"It certainly has a different feel to home," Lydia agreed.

Angela was happy to see her sister so relaxed. It was as though

the city air had settled on the pair of them, and they felt closer than ever. Angela knew how lucky she was to have a sister like Lydia, even though she had the misfortune of losing their parents.

“The first ball is this weekend, is it not?” Angela asked.

She pulled her gown from the garment bag and grinned widely. It was incredibly beautiful and she knew she would feel like a princess wearing it.

“It is indeed,” Lydia replied. “The Duke of Grangeford is hosting, and he always puts on quite a show.”

Yes, Angela had heard of this lord—rich and eccentric and free to express himself.

“I might burst with the wait.”

“There are many people eager to meet you, so I hear,” Lydia said.

“Your debut will be a grand success, and I suspect with a pretty face like yours, you will be the talk of the season.”

Angela smiled at that, but she wished her sister wouldn't always put the emphasis on a pretty face. Angela knew herself to have a modicum of beauty, but she'd much rather be known for being intelligent or witty. She'd rather be like Lydia than any of the vapid, beautiful girls they were sure to meet this season.

Besides, Angela understood it to be what it was—a compliment to her but an insult to Lydia herself, and she dearly wished her sister did not think in such a way. She was an incredible role model, a wonderful sister, a successful steward for the Duchy, and beautiful with it.

“My ladies,” the butler said, making Angela jump. She hadn't

heard the knock at the door. “There is one Lord Somerset here to see you.”

“Humphrey!” Lydia said excitedly before clearing her throat. “Show him into the drawing room, won’t you? We’ll be down momentarily.”

Angela watched as her sister lit up with true delight—a sweet and tender moment. And she referred to Lord Somerset by his first name, to Angela’s shock. It was rare for Lydia to show her true feelings, and whenever she did, it was normally an accident like now. Angela could see the love in her sister’s eyes, even if her sister would not admit it. She hoped that, one day, she would have a look like that about some gentleman or other.

“And you say you only like him in a professional capacity,” Angela teased.

Lydia seemed to take a lot of steadying, deep breaths as they made their way down to the drawing room, and Angela couldn't help but giggle at her. Even as they sat with Humphrey, the two looked at each other as though Angela wasn't even in the room.

She didn't mind, as it was nice to see. Besides, William would be arriving soon, and Angela simply couldn't wait to talk to her brother again. As Lydia and Humphrey talked about cake, Angela thought about all the questions she was going to ask William—*how is Eton? Do you have any friends? What have you learned this week? Isn't it just wonderful to be in London?*

“Lord William, my lady,” Manning said, entering the room with a bow.

Angela propelled herself from her seat in a second, as though she had been tense and ready to spring. She cried out her brother's name and positively threw herself at him, so hard that he staggered slightly

backwards.

“Oh, William! How I’ve missed you!”

William mumbled something into Angela’s hair, but she held him far too close and tight to understand what he said. She didn’t care; she was just glad to have him back.

“How are you?” she asked, pulling back and holding him at arm’s length, a proud and happy grin on her face. “Are you well? You look well. How was the journey? How is school? Would you like to—”

“Angela,” he chuckled. “Please, one thing at a time!”

That sweet smile—how she’d missed it! She felt her cheeks warm with a blush.

“Oh, I’m sorry!”

She stepped aside, letting Lydia make her welcome. It was significantly more subdued than Angela’s own, but equal in love, and Angela thought it the perfect demonstration of how different the two young ladies had become.

“It’s good to see you, William,” Lydia said calmly. “We’ve missed you.”

“And I you, dear sister,” William said. “Believe me.”

He sounded almost weary, and Angela vowed to get to the bottom of that as soon as they were alone. Now, though, she knew, there would be a new flurry of excitement. Humphrey was waiting just a few paces behind them.

As if on cue, Lydia said, “I’ve brought a male companion for you.”

“Really? When do I get to meet him?”

“Right away! William, meet the Earl of Somerset.”

At fourteen years old, William was already a tall boy, and Angela thought that if he didn’t stop growing soon, he’d reach the ceiling. His hair was a bright blond, not too dissimilar to Angela’s own, and his eyes held every color of the ocean.

He was quick and bright, a clever boy by all accounts, though still just that—a boy. He often found himself in trouble for behaving like an adult and thinking of himself fully grown. But no matter how mature he liked to pretend to be, Angela could still see the flushes of

youthful uncertainty within him.

It was not long before Maria arrived, too. Lady Maria Wright, her sister's dearest friend and her very own official chaperone for the season. She had cared for Lydia deeply after the accident, and she had fallen in love with her husband Andy, the coachman who had saved Lydia's life.

Despite the scandal it had caused, Maria's father helped Andy become a gentleman of sorts, and the pair have lived in blissful happiness ever since their marriage. She was a short, plumpish woman, with short dark hair and mysterious dark eyes, and she was a cheerful, jolly young lady who everyone wanted to be around.

Together, the four of them took tea and it was pleasant enough. Angela was glad to have this moment to get another glimpse of Humphrey. He was, it seemed, a kindly man, who spoke to William in a fitting manner—as a young adult, rather than as a child.

It would go well, their companionship; Angela could see that already. Humphrey would be a good influence on William, and an excellent role model. It's something he had missed since their father died, and though he knew men young and old at school, it wasn't the same as having a close companion.

After an hour or so of chatter and excitement, William affected a stifled yawn.

"Goodness, I'm awfully tired after the journey. Do you mind terribly if I take a rest?"

"Of course not," Lydia said kindly. "I'm not surprised you are tired."

"I'll escort you to your room, if you like," Angela said, hopeful to

have a little time alone with their brother—and a chance to ask him about school.

“That would be nice, thank you,” William replied.

Together, they made their goodbyes, each promising to meet with Humphrey and Maria again in the coming days.

They were barely out of the room when Angela bombarded him with questions.

“So how is school? Really, I mean. You sound tired.”

William laughed. “You would be tired, too! It’s hard work, but I’m enjoying it.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “What are the other boys like? Do you have a favorite teacher?”

“I’ll answer every single one of your questions,” William said.

“But first, I want to know all about Lord Somerset!”

“Humphrey? What about him?” Angela frowned. She wanted to know about William, not Humphrey.

“He seems a decent chap,” William said.

“He is,” Angela agreed, sensing there was something else William wanted to know, but not quite sure what it was.

“Well? Are you going to tell me or not?”

They mounted the last set of steps and rounded the corner to William's room. His luggage had already been deposited and a fire flickered in the grate.

"Tell you what?"

"How long they've been courting!"

Angela cracked into laughter. "But they aren't courting," she said.

"Of course they are. It's obvious enough to anyone with eyes."

"No, really, William," Angela urged. She sat on his bed with a bounce. "Although I think Lydia would secretly like that."

“From what little I know of Humphrey, I believe he would like it, too. They look at each other with love in their eyes.”

“And what would a fourteen-year-old boy know of love?” Angela teased.

“Plenty,” William replied, affronted. “The ability to recognize love is innate, it’s built into us. I’m certain.”

Angela snorted. “When did you become so philosophical?”

William’s cheeks reddened with embarrassment, but he pushed on all the same. “I really like him already, and I really believe that we’ll be seeing a courtship between them sooner rather than later.”

“I hope you’re right,” Angela said with a sigh. “Lord knows Lydia deserves some happiness in her life.”

“She does, it’s true.” He paused for a moment and then grinned at Angela. “And what of you? Do you have anyone special?”

Angela shrugged with a nonchalance she didn’t feel, her heart suddenly racing and an image of that man, the one who had soaked her, flashing in her mind.

“That’s what the season is for, isn’t it? I’m hoping to meet someone special there.”

William scoffed. “You’re blushing! No one blushes without good reason.”

“Perhaps I’m just a little warm,” Angela shot back.

“I don’t believe you,” William said plainly. “Not for a single second. Come on, tell me the truth. We get to see each other so rarely, and it’s unfair to make me work so hard for the truth!”

Angela’s smile grew despite herself and she thought again of the man she had met a few days previously.

“All right,” she admitted. “There was one man who intrigued me, and in truth, I haven’t been able to get him out of my head ever since. But the chances are I shall never see him again.”

William cocked his head at her in question. “Intrigued you how?”

Angela looked sheepish and was unable to stop the giggle on her lips. “He covered me in mud.”

William raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Well, one thing is clear

to me now. I will never understand women!”

Chapter 9

As soon as they'd arrived at Grangeford estate, James had taken himself off into the crowd, leaving Edward to politely greet their hosts and thank them for their invitations.

They'd arrived late, and the ballroom already teemed with people, smiling and chattering happily. The excitement was palpable, the thrum of it a physical vibration through the air.

It was the people that drew Edward's attention, much more than the décor—though that was undeniably beautiful in its understated elegance. There were a few new faces, some youngsters both male and female appearing for the first time. But for the most part, the shape of the ton rarely changed from year to year.

They were an eclectic bunch, though, and that was one of the

few things Edward liked about attending the season. The ladies wore gowns of every color imaginable, making them a veritable rainbow, and they each fluttered fans in front of their faces or coquettishly held up dance cards in the hopes of catching a dance or two.

Even the men, in their near-matching suits, made for an interesting sight. Despite the sea of black tailcoats, waistcoats were splashed with as much color as the gowns, and it seemed to Edward that the older men mixed with the youngsters quite seamlessly. There was no denying that society was judgmental, but Edward liked how well these different people mingled, too.

He picked up a glass of champagne as he passed the drinks table, thinking to take a punch but ultimately deciding champagne would look more sophisticated. Not that he was particularly bothered about what others thought of him, of course. He was not there to find himself a match, but rather to find James one—and to ensure he did not make too much of an idiot of himself.

“Nothing too difficult, then,” he muttered sardonically.

“I beg your pardon?”

With wide eyes and a flutter in his chest, Edward turned suddenly to the woman who had spoken. She stood next to him, wearing a lilac satin gown overlaid with ivory lace, with princess puffed sleeves and a satin waistband. It made her look younger than the lines on her face would suggest, but he guessed her to be in her late twenties.

“I’m sorry?” he said, surprised by her interruption into his thoughts.

“You said something. A moment ago,” she said plainly. “And as it is only you and I in this part of the room, I can only assume you were talking to me.”

“I . . . well, yes.” He looked awkwardly down at his feet and let out a little chuckle. “I simply said how lovely an evening it is.”

She eyed him, her lips pursed in careful amusement. “It is indeed lovely,” she said. “And more so now that I have a handsome gentleman to talk to.”

Edward shifted uncomfortably but threw her a smile all the same. She was brazen, he’d give her that, and so obviously flirting with him. He looked her up and down, taking in the shape of her face and her almond eyes. Her hair was the color of midnight, but shot through with lighter streaks in the manner of stars.

She was striking to look at, pretty even, and her boldness made her appealing. Even as an older woman, Edward could see how easily she would be able to attract men, though she lacked the subtlety and charm he normally liked in a lady. Still, he found himself turning in

her direction and smiling at her.

“You know,” she said, a glass of champagne hugged to her chest, “I haven’t had a single dance yet this evening.”

“Well now, that is a tragedy,” he said. “I guess we’ll have to find some way of correcting that. Edward Lancaster. It’s a pleasure to meet you . . .” He raised an eyebrow in question.

“Lady Penelope Johnson,” she said, taking a step closer to him.

“Johnson? Any relation to the baron?”

“Daughter,” she said with a coy smile. “For my sins.”

Edward laughed. She was funny, too. “Shall we have that dance

now?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

As they made their way to the ballroom floor, Lady Penelope began to chatter incessantly about the others at the ball. Edward was so surprised that he merely blinked, unable to say anything in return, and as the dance began, it seemed that her chatter would never stop.

“You’re a good listener,” she said with a smile not long after the dance began.

He laughed. “I try my best,” he said, all the while thinking he wouldn’t be, if he could get even a sliver of a word in.

“I hear Lady Fraser is with child again. Can you believe it? You’d think four would be quite enough.”

“But five is a party,” Edward quipped. “Do you not like children, then?”

“Children are perfectly acceptable and a necessity, of course. But I shall stop at one.”

“How very organized,” Edward said. “I think I’d rather like five children. A house is not a home without the laughter of young mouths.”

“It’s a good job we’re not engaged to be married then, isn’t it?” she replied with a snort of laughter.

Indeed it is.

Striking though she may be, and interesting certainly, this Lady Penelope was not the sort of woman Edward imagined when he thought of a wife. He let his mind wander as she talked, his body taking him through the steps automatically, her quick voice a soft accompaniment to the music in-between dance moves.

He tried to think of those features he would want in a wife. Someone kind and loving, of course, but not someone meek. He liked the idea of a woman who was not afraid to tell him when he was wrong. He wanted someone feisty and strong-willed, but gentle, too.

He imagined her as tall and slim, with blonde hair the color of sunshine. He pictured her chocolate brown eyes, the life and passion that shone out through them. And, he realized with a startled chuckle, he imagined her with a smudge of mud across her nose.

The commoner! He had not imagined his ideal woman, but rather, the woman he had soaked with his carriage a while ago. And thinking

about her now, he realized that yes, she had been rather perfect.

He would much prefer dancing with *her*, but he knew the chances of that were practically zero. He had no idea who she was, and with her being a commoner, he was unlikely to ever find out.

“Is something amusing, Mr. Lancaster?” Lady Penelope asked, cocking her head at him and making him realize he had released his humor out loud.

“No,” he said, shaking his head though he still chuckled. “Not at all. I’m simply having the most delightful time.”

As the set came to an end, Lady Penelope looked at him expectantly. He cocked his head, unsure what exactly it was she expected. She huffed, though amused, and rolled her eyes at him.

“Well? Are we going to dance again?”

“Oh!” He chuckled, but awkwardly this time. As pleasant as the dance had been, he most certainly did not want to dance with her again. Apart from anything else, it might give her the wrong impression.

“You’re going to let me down, aren’t you?” she said plainly, before smiling sadly and looking off into the distance. “It seems I am rather incapable of finding anyone willing to dance with me more than once.”

Edward did feel a modicum of sympathy for her, but he couldn’t help thinking that if she were perhaps a little less forward, a little less brash, she might have more of a chance.

“Heavens, it’s not that, it’s—”

“I know,” she said, smiling warmly at him this time. “You have developed quite a thirst, you need fresh air, you’re tired. I understand, Mr. Lancaster.”

He let out a small awkward laugh, then nodded to her and left the ballroom floor as fast as he could, feeling his cheeks burn with embarrassment. He was not used to such an unabashed woman, and he wasn’t entirely sure he liked it. He’d much prefer someone with a quiet confidence.

He wandered around the room for a little while, smiling politely and greeting people, but not getting himself into any deep conversations or running the risk of being caught up in a dance again. He wondered what had happened to James. His cousin had been awfully quiet, and that set Edward worrying. James was not normally one for quiet solitude or polite conversation.

When he heard the raucous laughter coming from the side of the ballroom, Edward nodded his understanding. Whoever James was talking to was finding his conversation highly amusing—and, most likely, extremely improper.

Edward followed the noise, weaving through the dancers and the revelers, until he saw James in the distance. He leant against the wall, a glass of champagne in hand, and a small crowd of eager young men around him.

His reputation clearly preceding him, these impressionable men clung to James' words and his salacious tales with wide eyes and open mouths. James, for his part, very clearly lavished in the attention.

“Fetch me another champagne, won’t you?” James said to one of the young men, who quickly scuttled off to obey his new idol.

Edward took a step forward and cleared his throat, making it obvious to James that he was present. James nodded in his direction, but he continued telling the men in his presence all about his exploits, especially amongst the lower-class women.

And then, as if spotting something in the distance, James raised his head to look over his followers, a scowl on his face. Edward followed his gaze curiously. There, across the room, was James' close friend, Humphrey.

“Look who it is,” James said with a sneer. He turned to his crowd with a wicked grin. “You see that gentleman over there?” As if as one, they turned to look, then nodded eagerly. “He used to be one of my dearest friends.”

Used to be?

Edward frowned. He had no idea what had happened between Lord Somerset and his cousin, but it didn't sound like it could be anything good.

“Do you want to hear something quite hilarious?” James asked. “He is here escorting the woman who will be my wife. Isn't that the funniest thing?”

Wife?

Again, Edward was shocked. He blinked rapidly, almost taking a step back. The plan had always been to find James a wife, of course, but from the way James spoke, it seemed as if it was a done deal.

“You have a plan?” Edward asked over the laughing young men.

“Of course I do, cousin,” James replied. “You didn't really think

I'd come all the way here without one, did you?"

"No, I don't suppose I did," Edward replied with a frown. "I guess I hadn't thought it through. So, what exactly is this plan of yours?"

"Don't fret, Edward. You don't need to know the details yet. All you need to know is that not only do I have a plan, but it will be a successful one. We shall return to Nordshire Manor with excellent news, and we shall both be praised by my father for our accomplishment."

Edward crumpled his chin then turned to glance at Lord Somerset again. He couldn't deny he was curious about why they were no longer friends—it was a story he would get at, eventually. They had been so close for so long, and it seemed unnatural for them to no longer be in contact.

In the meantime, though, he wondered who James could possibly have his eye on. And that's when he spotted her, the young lady with the heavily scarred cheek. She was talking intimately with Lord Somerset, as though the two were the best of friends.

They looked incredibly close, and Edward wondered whether it would be possible for James to break up such a union. But then he remembered how meek and mild Lord Somerset was known to be, and just how ruthless James could be.

"And there she is," James said with a smug satisfaction. "My wife to be. She doesn't know it yet, of course, but she will agree to it all right. She's not stupid enough to turn down what I'm offering her. After all, a woman with a face like that doesn't have a lot of choices."

"That's rather cruel," Edward said, irritated but far from astonished at his cousin's words.

“Is it?” James asked, turning to look at him blankly. “The way I see it, I’ll be doing her a favor. Sure, she has some good features, but you can’t get past those marks. I’m sure wooing her will be easy.”

Edward inhaled deeply, feeling his teeth grind together in frustration. He couldn’t say anything, not here, and even if he did, James wouldn’t listen. Once he had his mind set on a course of action, there was no changing it.

“Please excuse me,” Edward said, offering the group the very best smile he could muster.

He breathed a sigh of relief even as he turned, keen to get as far away from his cousin as was possible, all the while reminding himself why he was doing any of this at all. His uncle had done so much for him in his life. It felt only right he repaid the favor. If only the fee were a little less steep.

As he passed the drinks table, he once again swiped a glass, though this time of lemonade instead of champagne. He was tired of alcohol. He marched through the room with a level of determination that didn't quite reach a decision regarding where he was going. He was just *going*.

So much so that he walked right into someone, stumbling and spilling his lemonade.

The young lady let out a squeal of shock and horror, the cold of his drink no doubt already seeping through her gown.

“Goodness me, I’m so dreadfully sorry,” he said, staring down in distress at the blooming stain on the ivory gown.

“You!”

The word was angry, vicious almost, and it made him freeze, not looking up at her.

“It’s you again,” she snapped. “Do you make a habit of ruining ladies’ gowns?”

It felt as though his heart skipped a beat, as though the breath had been punched from his very lungs. Still, he did not look up at her, but he knew that voice. He’d thought of that voice often since the last time he had heard it.

And the last time he had seen her, he had soaked her through to the skin, much like he had done today. *The commoner!*

The words came into his mind for the second time that day, in a flash, and he looked up at her aghast.

“I—I—I . . .”

“And now you have nothing to say,” the lady cried, though even he could hear the laughter just beneath the surface of her voice. “Are you not going to offer to have my gown cleaned this time?”

But before he could say another word, the biggest, warmest smile grew across his cheeks. He had found her again.

Chapter 10

Throughout the day, Angela had been almost rendered insensible with nerves, given that this would be her first time attending a ball in London. Her stomach roiled and she felt nauseous just thinking about it—so much so that she had even considered feigning illness so she didn't have to go!

Lydia and Maria had been at home all day, and though they humored her a little, they were both so relaxed, so content, as if they didn't quite realize what was happening. How could they not see how big an event this was to Angela?

Of course, in the rare moments her mind actually calmed, she knew they did see it, and she did not doubt that they had felt the same at their debut. But those moments were few and far between, and as Maria helped her dress, she couldn't stop shaking.

“Heavens, child, you’re shaking like a leaf on an autumn’s day!”

Maria said with a laugh as she slid the silk covered button through the buttonhole.

“I can’t help it,” she cried. “I’ve never felt so nervous in all my life.”

Lydia put a kind hand on Angela’s shoulder and smiled at her.

“My dear, lovely sister. There really is no need to be nervous. You know all the dances, you know the etiquette, and you are a charming young lady with so much to offer. There really is no need to worry.”

Maria guided Angela to the chair in front of the dressing table and gently pushed on her shoulders to get her to sit.

“Not like the Elliot girls,” she said with a snort. “It’s said that Lord Elliot is in desperate debt, and he’ll marry the girls off to the

highest bidder just to get himself out of his self-induced troubles.”

“The man has no shame,” Lydia said, her distaste evident. “I hear all his debts are the result of gambling.”

Angela, for her part, stared at her reflection, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. “And they’re such pretty young things,” she said with a shiver. “I dread to think what will become of them.”

“Their poor mother is a nervous wreck, I hear,” Maria said. “Certainly not strong enough to stand up to her brute of a husband.”

She picked the soft silver-backed brush up from the dressing table and began to pull it through Angela’s golden locks.

“It’s no surprise really, though,” Lydia said, leaning against the dressing table and fiddling with the curls that fell around Angela’s

forehead. “I mean, wasn’t she in the very same position at her debut?”

“How awful,” Angela said, her body tense as she continued to stare at her reflection.

Maria giggled as she began pinning Angela’s curls up, making them look like a cascading waterfall of gold.

“Quite a turnaround, isn’t it? At one time, Lord Elliot was rich enough to buy his beauty, and now he has to sell his daughters just to survive.”

“I suppose if you are the type of person to do the former, you don’t have the moral set to prevent you from doing the latter,” Lydia said.

“Can we just stop?” Angela snapped, perhaps a touch louder than

she intended.

Lydia turned surprised eyes upon her. “Goodness me, Angela, where did that come from?”

Angela sighed and briefly closed her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I really am. But I don’t think all this gossip is helping.”

“It’s not gossip, dear,” Maria said, sliding in yet another pin. “It’s a fact. And besides, I thought it would help you realize that *you*, of all the young ladies debuting, have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

“It doesn’t make me realize that at all,” Angela said, exasperated. “All it does is make me feel immeasurably sorry for those girls. Your words are cruel and thoughtless, and I’d really rather not think of such things at my debut.”

Lydia shot Maria a guilty look, and then took Angela's hand.

“You're right. We're sorry. You know we are only trying to make you feel better, don't you?”

“I know,” Angela said, squeezing Lydia's hand.

“All right,” Maria said brightly, taking a step back. “Stand up and take a look at yourself.”

Angela did as she was asked, walking slowly over to the full-length looking glass with a heart that felt as though it might pound right out of her chest. She glanced up at Lydia and Maria—both with proud grins—before turning to look at herself.

She wore a gown of pure silk in a delicate ivory color, with a bright white ribbon around the high waistband. Her white satin gloves

reached up her arms, above her elbows and almost meeting the short, simple sleeves of her gown.

“You look truly beautiful,” Maria said, smiling at Angela’s reflection.

Lydia moved to the other side of her and similarly looked into the looking glass. “You really do,” she said. “I am so proud of you, dear sister.”

Angela smiled in return, taking hold of each of their hands and feeling their energy rush through her, even though she could not believe what they said.

She was not ugly; she knew that. But she wasn’t convinced she could be described as beautiful, either. She was a mere pale imitation of how Lydia looked when she prepared for her own debut. Angela

remembered it well, for she thought her sister looked like an angel.

Even now, unfortunately scarred, Angela thought Lydia one of the most beautiful women she knew—and interesting with it. Angela didn't even have that on her side. They insisted she had a lot to offer, but she just couldn't see it.

Her mind raced with worry. She didn't look good enough, people wouldn't like her, she'd forget how to dance as soon as she got out onto the ballroom floor. Her anxieties even stretched to the ridiculous. What if she twisted her ankle and fell in front of everyone? What if she spilled her drink? What if she forgot every word in the English language as soon as any man approached her?

“Angela,” Lydia said softly, having noticed her sister's rising panic. “Ignore our chatter and know this for absolute certain: you will be quite all right.”

“You’re sure?” Angela asked, chewing on her bottom lip.

“More than I’ve ever been about anything,” Lydia said. “And don’t forget, Maria and I will always be close by for whatever you need.”

She squeezed Angela’s hand, and Angela took in a deep breath, letting it out of her mouth slowly to calm herself. Then she smiled and nodded at Lydia’s reflection, her eyes silently thanking her sister for everything.

By the time they arrived at the ball, Angela’s panic had calmed somewhat. Though she was still nervous, she found herself so engrossed in the evening’s activities that she didn’t dwell on her anxieties.

The ballroom itself was beautiful, almost overwhelmingly so, and

Angela spent at least the first thirty minutes tuning out of conversations as she marveled at the place. It had a refined elegance that she hoped to one day replicate in her own home.

Many of the gentlemen Lydia and Maria introduced her to added their names to her dance card, and Angela felt that the evening had begun well. She seemed well-received and people seemed to like her. That was a good start.

“All right,” Maria said, pulling her to one side but looking out over the crowd. “I’ve introduced you to several eligible bachelors, and you have more than a few dances lined up. The set is being called and the music will begin shortly. How are you feeling?”

Angela took in a deep breath and nodded. “A little better, yes,” she said. She looked down at her gown, smoothing out the skirt that did not need smoothing out, and then nodded again, her nerves throbbing through her. “I look all right, don’t I?”

“You look beautiful,” Maria reiterated.

“I believe this dance is mine, my lady?”

Angela spun around at the sound of the voice, trying to hide her wide-eyed surprise.

“Lord Arthur! Of course,” she said.

She glanced back over her shoulder at Maria, who nodded encouragingly, then took Lord Arthur’s hand and let him lead her to the dance floor, praying he could not feel her shaking through the fabric of her glove.

They danced in silence at first, which did nothing to help

Angela's nerves, but after the first minute or so of twirling around each other, Lord Arthur finally spoke.

“How are you finding your first ball, my lady?”

“A little overwhelming, if I'm honest,” she admitted with a guilty smile.

“Ah yes,” he said, smiling at her fondly. “First-ball nerves. I remember them well from last season.”

She cocked her head and looked questioningly at him. “Do men feel nervous too, then?”

Lord Arthur laughed, loudly but not unkindly. “Sweet girl. Of course we do. We're human, too.”

“It’s not a trait I had ever associated with the male of our species,” she said, her head tilted in thought.

He leant forward conspiratorially. “We’re just better at hiding it, that’s all,” he said and tapped his nose as though it was the greatest of secrets.

Angela giggled. She liked Lord Arthur, and he was doing an excellent job calming her fears. She wondered idly whether it was him who would become her husband—for that’s why she was there at all, wasn’t it? To make a good match.

He was pleasant enough, reasonably handsome, and amusing, but Angela couldn’t imagine spending the rest of her life with him. She laughed silently, reminding herself that she did not have to decide on a husband within the first hour of the first ball at her very first season!

Although she hoped to find a husband in her very first year, she knew there was no shame in it taking longer. Some ladies attended three or even four seasons before finding their match, and Angela would prefer to wait and find a man who set her soul on fire rather than marry for the sake of it.

After Lord Arthur, Angela danced with another two gentlemen. Again, they were acceptable men, and the dances were at least fun. It felt good to be on her feet and doing something physical, but none of them really captured her attention.

Not like the man who had soaked her the other week. He had somehow stuck in her mind, and not only for his atrocious behavior. Although she would admit it to no one, it was his face she pictured when she thought of her future husband.

Angela Stanley, stop that right now!

She told herself, yet again, that she was being ridiculous.

Attractive he may have been, but she would surely never see him again. She had to focus on the real and true options, not her imagined ones.

As the set ended, she curtsied to the gentleman she had been dancing with—she had quite forgotten his name, thanks to the sheer number of gentlemen she had met that evening. She glanced down at her dance card and realized she had a little break before her next dance.

She sighed with relief. As much as she enjoyed dancing, she was looking forward to a cool refreshment. She left the dance floor and wandered over to the edge of the room, to where she had earlier seen the drinks table.

She was almost bowled over by a man who came storming in her

direction. She leapt back, gasping loudly, throwing her hands up into the air. She could already feel the cold liquid on her stomach, but it was when she heard his voice that the tension in her truly began to grow.

“Goodness me,” he said. “I’m so dreadfully sorry.”

She knew that voice. She’d thought of it often. It was him—the man she had dreamt of!

“You!” she cried, in such shock that she could not temper the annoyance and amazement in her voice.

He froze, not looking up at her, so she couldn’t see his face, not properly. But she knew it was him, as truly as she knew her own name.

“It’s you again,” she said. “Do you make a habit of ruining ladies’ gowns?”

“I—I—I . . .” he stuttered, and she had to stifle a laugh.

He clearly remembered her, just as she remembered him. She wondered idly whether he had been lost in thoughts of her ever since they met the first time, or whether the romantic dream was hers alone. She swallowed, forcing her lips into an affected frown.

“And now you have nothing to say,” she said. “Are you not going to offer to have my gown cleaned this time?”

He straightened up, still an expression of horror and astonishment on his face, but as he looked at her—truly looked at her—his grimace turned into a warm, broad smile. She found her own lips responding, growing into the brightest and truest smile she’d had

all day.

She couldn't believe her luck! Admittedly, both meetings had ended badly for her gowns, but she'd found him again, just when she'd convinced herself it wasn't to be, that she'd never see him again.

"I am so dreadfully sorry," he said, his cheeks flushing ever so slightly. It looked adorable, the spray of pink on his flesh. "Is there anything I can do to make it better?"

She looked down at the spillage and pursed her lips. It wasn't as bad as it first seemed, just a small splash across the bodice that would dry off soon enough. It was nothing as bad as the muddy mess he'd got her into last time!

"No," she said, looking back up at him. "Except perhaps tell me your name."

For the first time that evening, she looked into his eyes. The green was rich and warm, sparkling under the candlelight. But for Angela, what attracted her most was the depth of them. She felt she could swim in them, and in doing so, learn everything there was to know about this man, just from his eyes alone. They spoke of his intelligence, of his drive, of his quick wit. Angela couldn't pull her gaze away from them.

"I . . . yes, of course." He chuckled, finally dragging his eyes away from hers. It seemed he was as dazed as she. "Edward," he said.

"Delighted to finally make your acquaintance, my lord."

"Call me Edward, please," he said. "I can hardly expect formality after what I have done to you on two separate occasions. And I must admit, Miss . . ."

He raised a questioning eyebrow, waiting for her response. She smiled slyly.

“Lady Angela.”

“Lady?” He blushed again, and Angela smiled. She realized she rather liked making him blush. “I must apologize again, then.”

“What have you done this time?” she asked, a tease upon her lips.

“I must admit that the last time we met, I assumed you were a commoner. It’s not often a lady walks home quite alone.”

“I enjoy the sunshine, and a little physical exercise does us all

good now and then, don't you agree?"

"I certainly do, my lady."

"Come now," she said, feeling herself simper and wondering where this new-found confidence came from. "If I am to call you Edward, then you must call me Angela. It's only fair."

"Very well, Angela," he said, bowing his head in accordance. "It's a pleasure to meet you—and properly, this time."

"I'm not sure this is a *proper* meeting," she said with a snort. "But I quite agree that it is a pleasant one. I'm hoping that at some point in the future, we will be able to meet under circumstances that don't involve my gown getting wet."

He sucked in his breath and shook his head, as though what she

suggested was painful. “I don’t know about that,” he teased. “Might be awfully difficult to manage, given my record.”

She giggled. “Indeed,” she said. “But could you at least try? For me?”

“For you, most certainly.”

They fell into a silence that was neither uncomfortable nor unwelcome, giving both of them a chance to admire the other. Angela drank in the sight of him, absorbing all the details that she could—from those perfect eyes to his chestnut hair, from his strong, squared shoulders to the tips of his toes.

She had an overwhelming urge to know him more, and in every way. She wanted to ask him question after question until she knew every inch of his life, and she wanted to share her story with him, too.

She simply couldn't let him turn around and leave without them first having a decent conversation.

It felt as though fate had brought them together, after their first unsuccessful meeting. Thus, she made a decision. Though it may be unladylike, she would ask *him* to dance.

“Say, how would you like to—”

But he interrupted her, his words trampling over hers, and she closed her mouth, looking up at him incredulously. For he'd had the very same idea.

“Do you have space on your dance card for me?” he asked. “I'd very much like to dance with you.”

The question sent a rush of excitement through her and she

grinned widely—so much more than when anyone else had asked her to dance. She would wipe the whole card clean if it meant even one single dance with Edward.

“I would love to dance,” she said. “And I shall always make space for the man intent on ruining my gowns.”

Chapter 11

Edward still couldn't quite believe this was happening, the thing he had daydreamed about for so long. She was as truly beautiful as he remembered, and her voice was like the sweetest music to his soul.

Even her name had a ring to it that he liked. *Angela*. Like an angel, sweet and divine and full of light. He was entirely fascinated by her already, and he wanted to talk with her and her alone. He wanted their conversation to never end.

Is this what they call love at first sight?

He shook away the fanciful thought, but for the first time, he did wonder whether this season held more for him than simply taking care of James. For the first time, it felt as though he had something to look forward to.

Edward took her hand as he led her onto the dancefloor, and that touch alone was electric, sending a bolt through him like lightning striking a tower. They just so happened to arrive at the beginning of a slow waltz.

It was a controversial dance, certainly, and he wondered how she felt about it. But the ease with which she slipped into his arms, placing her own hand delicately on his shoulder, he thought that perhaps she didn't mind it. He was pleased. It meant they would get to spend the whole dance looking into each other's eyes and he could talk only to her, not making polite conversation to some lady he had no interest in.

"What's your family name?" he asked once they were in full swing. "Since you are not, after all, a commoner, and indeed a member of the peerage, perhaps I know of your father. An earl, perhaps?"

“Duke, actually,” she said with a chuckle. “Angela Stanley, daughter of the late Duke of Dorset.”

“The late Duke of Dorset. My condolences. I seem to think I have heard a lot about your family before, though I can’t quite put my finger on what.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Angela replied. “Our family has courted gossip for a number of years. One grows used to it.”

“Dare I ask what sort of gossip?”

She laughed. “The pitying kind rather than the salacious kind,” she said. “There is no need to worry about your reputation, being seen with me.”

“I wouldn’t care either way,” he said. “Having the opportunity to dance with you is worth a thousand reputations.”

Her smile at his words lit him up from the inside. He adored her smile already, and he wished he could make her smile all day long.

“And you?” she asked. “You are Lord . . .?”

He blushed, feeling an embarrassed heat reach his cheeks. “I’m not, actually,” he said, his dance steps becoming stiff as he told her the truth.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“A gentleman I may be, but I am no lord. I don’t have a title. I’m plain old Mr. Lancaster.”

“Lancaster?” She tilted her head, the whirring of her mind almost visible in her eyes. “Lancaster . . .” She gasped and giggled, then turned back to him. “I’ve got it—Nordshire, yes?”

Edward laughed. “Yes, that’s right. My uncle is the Earl. In truth, I am attending the season at his behest, accompanying my cousin. Although now that I am dancing with you, I am most glad I agreed.”

Their bodies remained stiff as they danced, as though they could sense one another, so tantalizingly close. As if neither of them quite wanted to let go, because they did not trust what would come afterwards.

Edward could feel the energy coming off her, and it invigorated him in a way he had never before experienced. It was a wonderful feeling, one he hoped could continue indefinitely.

He wondered if fate had brought them together. He would never have been in London were it not for the outside interferences of James and his uncle. And it felt as though both times they met were under unusual circumstances.

He liked that idea—that they were destined to meet. It fed into the romantic ideals he tried to keep hidden from the world for fear of being mocked. And now that the world had brought them together, he would do all he could to make it happen again and again.

“Oh,” she said, pouting her lips.

It pulled his head from the clouds, from his dreams, and he looked down at her beautiful face, wondering what it was that had her moaning. *Goodness, she's dazzling.*

The way her hair fell around her pale face, the way her eyes cried out for a life of love and laughter. The way he could see into her very soul and knew it to be perfection. He wanted to hold onto it all, to never let it go.

“Edward,” she said, laughing.

Again, he shook his head, snapped out of his reverie. She put him in a daze.

“The music has stopped,” she said. “But you have not stopped dancing.”

He gasped and leapt back from her, looking around him in embarrassment. Thankfully, it didn’t seem that anyone had noticed, but it would have been very bad—and very inappropriate—if they had.

“It’s all right,” she said, her voice both calming and thrilling at the same time.

“I must say, Angela, I thought bumping into you was the best thing that had happened to me tonight, but it turns out I was wrong.”

“How so?” she asked, cocking her head.

“Dancing with you was.”

She laughed and slapped his arm, her playfulness filling his heart with joy and making him long to tease her in return. How had he found this incredible woman, a woman who had won him over so dreadfully easily?

“We could always go one better,” she said thoughtfully.

“I’m not sure we could ever beat that,” he said.

“Not even with another dance?”

“Hmm.” He put a finger to his lip and feigned a look of serious reflection. “I suppose it can’t do any harm to try,” he said. “But I shan’t be convinced until the end of the set.”

“Quick!” she cried, a mischievous glint in her eye as she held her arms out, the string quartet beginning to play once more. “If we do not hurry, we’ll miss the entire thing, and I want to have every second of it I can.”

“Quite right,” he said, jumping to attention and pulling her just a touch closer than was strictly proper.

He shivered at her touch, but he could see she liked it, too. Her eyes sparkled with delight, a youthful laughter that had seemed lost the other day. It was becoming more and more evident to Edward that she was beautiful no matter how she felt—be it angry or happy.

“Who are you here with?” he asked.

He didn’t feel it necessary to talk. He knew that together, they could just be and it would work; they would be content. But he wanted to know everything about her.

“Lady Maria Wright is my official chaperone,” she said. “But my elder sister, Lady Lydia, has also accompanied me, a secondary chaperone of sorts. She is as yet unmarried, and you know how much society frowns upon such things.”

“The dreaded rules,” he said with a chuckle. “It’s all terribly judgmental, don’t you agree?”

“I do,” she conceded. “And I’m glad they’re both here for me.”

“That’s understandable,” he said.

As the music picked up pace, so did their steps, and as he spun her around the room, he felt everything else melt away—his past and his future. All that mattered was the moment, with his hand upon her waist and the music that seeped into their souls and made their hearts sing out.

“And you?” she asked as they turned once again. “You mentioned you are here with your cousin?”

“Yes, I am. My uncle has set him a challenge of finding a wife. I

am simply here to ensure he does not get himself into trouble.”

“And does he have a tendency to do that? Get himself into trouble?” she asked, a bubble of laughter on her lips.

Edward opened his mouth to speak but paused, chuckling as he thought of the right way to say it. “He has something of a reputation, yes,” he said. “But I am certain all that will change once he finds himself a wife.”

“Ah yes, for women cure all ills.” She shot him an impish grin that had him laughing.

“So I hear,” he said. “I am yet to experience such a thing myself, though perhaps it is not so far into my future.”

“No,” she replied softly, staring into his eyes. “I don’t think it is.”

They took another turn on the dancefloor, immersed in the music, their bodies moving as if one and quite without thought. By now, Edward's back was to the seating area, and as Angela looked over to the couches, her eyes lit up.

"Oh look," she said, nodding in that direction.

Edward made half an attempt at turning to see over his shoulder before he gave up. It was impossible without ruining the dance, and he most definitely did not want to break away from her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's Lydia, my sister," she said, smiling with delight. "She seems to be having the most wonderful time talking to Lord Somerset."

“You know Lord Somerset?” he asked.

“He’s a business acquaintance of my sister’s, and I believe he is becoming a rather good friend.”

Edward creased his brow, curious that she mentioned her sister in business, but decided to think nothing of it. Angela had already mentioned that her sister was unmarried, and perhaps that was why.

Finally, the dance turned and he could see who she was referring to. Across the room, sat cozily and happily on a couch, Lord Somerset and Lady Lydia looked deep in conversation, and as much enamored by each other’s company as he and Angela were.

“She *does* look happy,” Edward admitted, though with dread stabbing at him.

Isn't she the one James has his eye on?

“I’m so very pleased for her. She deserves a little happiness in life.”

She looked wistful, and Edward felt it rude to pry into something so evidently personal, so he simply smiled back. But when her attention returned to him, she continued speaking.

“Lydia has had a difficult life, since the death of our parents.”

“Again, my condolences on your loss,” Edward said—and truly. He knew the pain of losing a beloved parent, and he wouldn’t wish it on anyone, least of all this wonderful lady in front of him.

“My younger brother—now the Duke of Dorset—is too young to perform his duties, being just fourteen. Lydia has been running the

estate for him, and she will continue to do so until she is either married herself, or William comes of age.”

She smiled sadly at him, and in that moment Edward knew he wanted to take care of her. She had been so strong for her sister, her empathy incredible, and he dearly wished he could make it all better—both for Angela and her sister.

“She and Lord Somerset look close, at least.”

“Yes.” Angela’s smile broadened into a warm one and she glanced back at her sister. “I think he may be the one.”

Edward hesitated to respond, looking briefly at the wall behind her, unsure what to say. He didn’t want to tell her about James’ plan to try and secure a courtship with Lady Lydia, hoping that things would work itself out and that James would pursue someone else. But

he wanted to shift focus and share something else, perhaps something personal about him.

“What is it?” she asked.

“My uncle, the Earl of Nordshire,” he began. “He raised me—at least, for most of my life. Lord Brighton is my cousin, but we have lived together as brothers for a number of years.”

“Your parents—”

“Also passed,” he said softly. “My mother died in childbirth, and my father died when he tried to prevent a brawl. I miss them both so very much.”

Angela smiled, compassion and understanding in her eyes, and Edward found he was glad he had told her. He was certain she

appreciated his attempts at empathizing, and though it was a terrible thing that had happened to them both, it was also something that connected them on a level that he didn't have with many other people. Only an orphan truly knew what it felt like to be an orphan.

The music slowed then began to fade, and Angela took a polite step backwards, bowing her head to him.

"I guess that's the end of the set," she said.

"A terrible shame," he said. Their eyes locked, and neither wanted to walk away. But alas, they'd had their two dances and could have no more—not then, not until the next ball.

"Angela?"

Angela gasped and spun around, a guilty expression written

across her face.

“Maria!” She quickly turned to Edward. “It was lovely meeting you, Mr. Lancaster. Until next time.”

He watched her scurry off with her chaperone, unable to stop the amused smile forming on his face.

“You really ought to have waited for a proper introduction,” the chaperone scolded. Angela’s cheeks flushed and she looked embarrassed, but she didn’t answer back.

“Really,” Lady Wright continued. “After everything you have learned! Come, let’s go find your sister.”

With Lady Wright, Angela had a childlike innocence that had been hidden as they danced—or perhaps she hid her true nature with

her chaperone. With him, she was strong and intelligent, with a quiet determination and a confidence that he suspected she hid often—or often hid from her.

As they disappeared into the crowd, Edward let his grin slip into a contented, peaceful smile, and he turned to walk away.

“Sorry,” a man muttered as he walked straight into Edward.

“No,” Edward said. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking where I was going. I seem to be making a habit of that today.”

“Mr. Lancaster!”

Edward turned to properly look at the man he walked into, only to find Lord Somerset staring at him in surprise.

“Lord Somerset! How nice to see you. Is everything all right? You look . . . a little irritated.”

In truth, Lord Somerset looked positively furious, and Edward was convinced he had been pacing. Even his fists were clenched at his sides, and his forehead was lined with anger.

“I’m fine,” Lord Somerset said, quite obviously lying.

“Are you certain?”

Lord Somerset sighed then looked over at where he had been sitting only moments ago.

“Yes,” he said, not looking back to meet Edward’s gaze. “It’s

nothing, really. Ignore me.”

Edward glanced over his shoulder at what Lord Somerset was looking at and then, doing a double take, turned to look directly. Sat where Lord Somerset once was, was James, looking for all the world as if he was wooing young Lady Lydia.

The dread that stabbed him earlier turned into a knot in his stomach. He felt sorry for Lord Somerset—he even felt sorry for Lady Lydia. But it was Angela he worried for most. He had a dreadful feeling that she wouldn’t like this development. She wouldn’t like it at all.

Chapter 12

In the two weeks since her first ball, Angela had seen Edward a total of three times, and at each event, she had danced with him twice. She totted it up in her head. That was eight dances in all!

Eight delightful dances, where the two of them had talked about their lives and what they hoped for in the future. She had found out he was studious and learned, and he shared her love of books.

He was a kind man, too—the kindest Angela thought she had ever met—and he had a sense of fairness that seemed better placed in a court of law than in a society ball. He was funny, and the teasing banter between the two of them was playful and fun, making Angela feel alive and excited.

He was everything Angela could ever imagine wanting in a man.

She sighed happily, preening herself in the looking glass. She didn't quite know why, but she spent much more time on her appearance now than she ever had done before. Where once she was not bothered, now she liked to ensure that each curl was in just the right place, and that her lips looked plump and red.

Angela hadn't yet told Lydia about Edward. She wasn't quite sure why—Lydia would be both understanding and excited for her—but it didn't feel like quite the right time. Angela had a strange urge to keep Edward for herself, not letting anyone share in this secret.

She suspected Maria knew, though she hadn't directly said anything. She had seen them dancing often, noting that Angela danced with Edward much more than with anyone else, and Maria looked at her knowingly.

She had danced with other gentlemen, of course. In fact, she'd

done little but dance at all the balls she had attended. She'd had several men call on her in the previous two weeks, as well. But none of them were right. Not like Edward. None of them had that spark that made her heart leap and her stomach rush with excitement.

“Staring into the mirror all day won’t change that ugly face of yours,” William said from the doorway, making Angela jump.

“At least I’m not as ugly as you,” she quipped back. “If I looked as toad-like as you, I’d positively hide away forever.”

William laughed, then wandered into the room and jumped onto Angela’s bed, lying back with his hands resting beneath his head. She smiled at his youthful energy and went to sit next to him. She loved it when he was home from Eton and was glad that Lydia had permitted him to visit more often while they were in London.

“Why *do* you keep staring at yourself?” he asked, looking up at the ceiling.

“I do not,” she insisted, but the pout on her lips told her that even she knew she did.

He sat and looked at her curiously. “You’re mooning over somebody.”

“I am not!” Angela cried defensively.

“Who is it? Come on, tell me.”

“No one,” Angela insisted, but she could feel the color forming on her cheeks, and from her brother’s grin, she knew she was not in the slightest bit convincing.

“Does Lydia know?”

“No!” Angela snapped. “She does *not*, and I don’t want her to.

Not yet, anyhow.”

“So there is someone! I knew it.” He grinned at her again, toothy and wide. She giggled.

“All right, I’ll tell you. But you must tell no one else!”

“I cross my heart,” he said, doing the sign on his chest.

“It’s the man who soaked me in the mud,” she said, her shoulders high and her lips pressed together in a cautious grin.

“Really?” William furrowed his brow. “I thought you had no idea who he was.”

“I don’t. I mean, I didn’t. But then he bumped into me at my first ball and spilt his lemonade on me.”

William guffawed, throwing his head back in amusement. “You mean to say he soaked you twice?”

Angela felt embarrassed and looked away, but she nodded. “Quite unintentionally, you understand.”

“Whoever knew that is the way to win over a lady,” William said wistfully, letting himself fall back onto the bed. “What’s his name?”

“Edward Lancaster,” Angela replied. “But you must not tell!”

“I won’t, I promise,” he said, and with such a sincere tone that she believed him. “Even with his propensity for soaking you, he sounds better than that hateful James fellow who seems to be sniffing around Lydia.”

Angela laughed. “Most definitely! I danced with him once, at the first ball.” She shuddered. “I thought him a gentleman when he approached me. I was informed by his cousin that he was attending the ball in search of a wife. I had no desire to be one of his candidates. However, all he did was ask questions about Lydia, so he must be interested in her. But the way he asked those questions did not sit well with me.”

“I hope he gets over it quickly,” William said with a sigh. “I don’t think I could bear it if he married Lydia, based on the rumors I have heard of that man. He is no different from any other rakish lord and it seems folly to think a man like that could change.”

“It’s all right,” Angela said. “I don’t think Lydia herself could bear it either.”

* * *

Later on that afternoon, Angela meandered down the stairs. Maria was coming for tea, and the three ladies would discuss the progress of the season thus far. Angela had sworn herself to secrecy, not yet ready to give up her confidence, but she knew how easily led she would be by all the excitable gossip. She would, she decided, steer any conversation in Lydia’s direction instead.

She stopped in the doorway of the parlor, watching her sister. Lydia had arrived earlier than either Angela or Maria—as was her habit—and she was positively salivating over the three tiers of sweet treats Mrs. Beaumont had provided for the afternoon.

Three tiers! That's a tier each!

Lydia licked her lips hungrily, eyeing each cake in turn, and the sight of it made Angela chuckle. Lydia so often restricted herself in life, in order to run the estate successfully, that her reticence had reached even into her eating habits.

“There’s really no need to deprive yourself, Lydia,” Angela said, leaning on the door post and smiling at her sister.

Lydia visibly jumped and threw Angela a shamefaced look, though she had nothing to be ashamed about.

“Angela!” Lydia chastised. “You really oughtn’t to sneak up on people, you know.”

“I didn’t!” Angela protested, pushing herself off the doorframe with her shoulder. “It’s not my fault you were so engaged that you didn’t notice my arrival. Although I can quite see what caught your attention. It does all look rather delicious.”

“Doesn’t it?” Lydia asked, gazing lovingly at the cake stand once more. Angela thought she had that very same look in her eyes when she looked at Humphrey, as if he was some tasty morsel.

They talked for a while, teasing poor Mrs. Beaumont for eavesdropping on their conversation and laughing wildly together. This playful, lighthearted side to Lydia was Angela’s favorite, and she liked it when she got a chance to jest with her. It reminded her of when they were children, and seeing the lightness in Lydia’s eyes told her that all was not lost to the difficulties of life.

“Lady Maria Wright.” Beaumont stepped out of the room as soon as he’d announced Maria’s arrival.

“Maria!” Lydia leapt from her seat and pulled her friend into an embrace, while Angela waited patiently for her turn.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” Maria said brightly once they had greeted one another. She took up the offered seat and grinned. “I’m so glad to be here.”

Lydia sorted the tea while Angela looked at Maria. There was something different about her today, something she couldn’t put her finger on, but she knew she would find out soon enough. Maria was not one for keeping secrets, especially when they were about herself. Angela wasn’t even sure she was capable.

“So?” Maria asked, looking so intently at Angela that she almost shied away. “How have your first two weeks of the season gone?”

Angela paused, her lips twitching as they tried to grow into a smile. “Wonderful,” she said eventually. “It’s gone so quickly and yet feels like more than two weeks, all at the same time. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” Lydia said. “And it’s often the case when one is enjoying oneself.”

“I feel as if I’ve been a member of the *ton* for years. I fit right in,” Angela said.

She really did feel as though she had slipped seamlessly into this new world, a world she had been so terrified of beforehand. Part of her, though, thought Edward was at least partly responsible for that. She wasn’t at all convinced that she would have been so comfortable, had she not known he would be at every event as well.

“You do,” Maria agreed. “And have there been any gentleman callers?”

“Many,” Lydia said, answering for her. Angela was pleased—she didn’t think she’d be able to keep her mouth shut, otherwise. “Angela is the talk of the season; everyone wants a bit of her.”

“There have been a few,” she admitted in a small voice. *And then there is Edward.*

“Anyone worthy of note?” Maria asked, head tilted in Angela’s direction.

“No,” Angela said softly. *Apart from Edward.* “No one special, not yet.” *Apart from Edward,* her insistent thought repeated.

Angela could feel Lydia’s eyes on her, and she prayed the color in

her cheeks would not give her away. She was not ready for this to come out, especially as she wasn't even courting Edward—not yet, at least. Perhaps when he finally called on her, then she would share it with her sister. But for now, it would remain a secret.

“And how about you, Maria?” Angela asked, desperate to change the subject. “How are you finding the season?”

“It’s perfectly pleasant,” Maria said, a coy and knowing smile playing on her lips. “As it always is. But actually . . .”

She grinned and Angela narrowed her eyes. Something most definitely was going on.

“Actually what?” Lydia asked.

“Actually, I have some news that isn’t much to do with the

season.”

Not to do with the season? Angela frowned. Wasn’t everything to do with the season when they were in London?

“Oh yes?” Lydia asked, very obviously as intrigued as Angela herself.

“I’m . . .” Maria hunched her shoulders and looked as though she could just burst with glee. “I’m with child!”

Angela gasped, then let out a laugh of delight. “Heavens, how wonderful!”

“My deepest congratulations, dear Maria,” Lydia said.

They talked a while about Maria's joy, and what the future held. They discussed nurseries and clothing, and Andy's reaction. Angela felt incredibly happy for her friend, her own happiness written all over her features.

It was then that a sudden thought came to her. If Maria was with child, she may not wish to chaperone Angela anymore. That would mean no more events, no more season. *No more Edward.*

"You'll still be escorting me to the balls though, won't you?" Angela asked in a fluster of panic. "Even being with child?"

"Of course!" Maria said, throwing Angela a pitying look. "I'm your official chaperone. I'll be there every step of the way."

Angela let out a sigh of relief as her sister and Maria began chattering excitedly about the latest gossip. Angela tuned out, not

really interested in the fates of other ladies. It was only her own that captured her imagination.

It wasn't until she spotted Lydia positively squirming in her seat that she brought her attention back to the room.

"There is one thing," Lydia said in answer to Maria's insistence that she must have something to tell them.

"What?" Angela asked, leaning eagerly forward.

"I have the funniest feeling about Viscount Brighton," Lydia said, idly running her fingertip around the ridge of her teacup.

"Oh really?" Maria asked. "In what way?"

Angela frowned, shooting her sister a disapproving look, not that Lydia seemed to notice. “I have noticed you’ve been spending a lot of time with him,” she said. “You told me not to do that with any gentleman.”

“That’s different,” Lydia said, though Angela could not see how. “You’re looking for a husband, whereas I am not.”

“But you should be,” Maria admonished. “You’re no spinster yet.”

“That’s just the thing,” Lydia continued. “So far this season, we’ve attended four balls. Plus there was the luncheon at the Gainsboroughs’, and the afternoon tea at the Fennings’. Lord Brighton has sought me out at every single event, and that’s not to mention the times he has called upon me at the house.”

“He likes you!” Maria declared, much to Angela’s chagrin. She didn’t want that rake near her sister.

“Indeed,” Lydia said thoughtfully. “I get the strangest feeling that the Viscount is actually trying to court me! It’s most bizarre.”

“It’s not bizarre,” Maria said. “It’s wonderful.”

No it’s not, Angela thought snidely.

“Is it?” Lydia asked. “I would have thought it more peculiar than wonderful.”

“For goodness’ sake, Lydia,” Maria said, rolling her eyes. “A man showing you interest is far from *peculiar*. It’s quite normal, and something to be pleased about. You have gone so long without a male companion that you have forgotten how one seeks out a lady.”

Angela couldn't bear it, hearing Maria encourage Lydia in that direction. It was as if they had both quite forgotten about Humphrey, and she didn't understand it. If Lydia thought of Humphrey as she herself thought of Edward—and she was convinced she did—there was simply no possible way she would be willing to throw it all away for a brute like Lord Brighton.

“But what about Humphrey?” she asked, trying to keep the irritation from her voice. “I thought—”

“What about Humphrey?” Lydia asked.

“I thought you and he were getting along well,” Angela said.
“I’ve always rather liked Humphrey.”

“As have I,” Lydia conceded. “He’s a good friend, but that’s all he

is.”

Angela stared at her in shock. Could she have misread the cues happening between her sister and Lord Somerset? For the longest time, she had seen her sister send away suitors because of her scars, all except her “friend” Lord Somerset. But now she is showing interest in Lord Brighton all of a sudden. Her wits had not been damaged in the carriage accident, but it indeed had damaged her capacity to pursue romance. So what had changed after all this time?

“Truly, dear sister? Just a friend?”

“What?” Lydia asked. “He is!”

“Absolutely,” Maria said calmly. “That couldn’t be more patently true, could it, Angela? And Lord Somerset has not lead on about any possible romance or courtship.”

Maria was trying to keep the peace, but Angela wouldn't have it. She would make her sister see her point of view.

"You are clearly seeing something I am not, Maria," Angela replied.

"No, I'm not, dear Angela. I'm teasing."

Angela took in a deep breath. "It seems to me," she said firmly, "that you rather like Humphrey, and it's plain to all who can see that Humphrey rather likes you too."

"You're talking nonsense," Lydia said. "There is absolutely nothing going on between Humphrey and me, and nor will there ever be."

Maria continued to taunt, giggling with it. Angela laughed along with her, getting in the spirit of teasing her sister, the color in her cheeks a good reward. Even if she would not admit it, Lydia clearly had feelings for Humphrey—and from the sheepish expression on her face, she knew it, too.

Angela could relax in the knowledge that all would come right in the end. Love had a way of winning; she knew that. It had brought her and Edward together on two different occasions, both unusual and unlikely to happen. She had to trust that fate would also work its magic on Lydia and Humphrey.

“All right,” Maria said brightly. “Subject change, Angela, or your sister is likely to explode with rage at our jesting.”

Angela chuckled. “I think you are right.”

“Tell me, then,” she asked. “What of the men you have met? You have certainly danced with several handsome and eligible options.”

Angela’s smile grew unbidden, and she bit her bottom lip, looking away from Maria so that she couldn’t see the passion in her eyes. She was falling for Edward—or perhaps she had already fallen—and she was certain that it showed on her face.

“I take the grin to mean you have noticed. Let me see,” Maria said, looking up to the ceiling as she pretended to think. “Ah yes, I believe you make that face whenever one Mr. Lancaster walks into the room. Is that true?”

Angela glanced over at Lydia, wide-eyed with concern. It seemed that her sister hadn’t been listening, but at the mere mention of Edward, her interest was piqued and she was leaning forward eagerly.

“Mr. Lancaster? Any relation to Lord Brighton?” she asked.

Angela closed her eyes and shook her head. “Yes. They are cousins. We’ve danced a few times, that’s all.”

“Several times, in fact.”

“Eight, to be exact,” Angela said, then kicked herself under the table for showing herself.

“Not that you’ve been counting,” Lydia said with a laugh.

“All right, all right,” Angela said, holding her hands up in submission. “I admit it. He’s rather handsome.”

“You’re telling me,” Maria said, teacup to her lips.

“And an excellent dancer. And a good conversationalist. But there is nothing more to it.”

“You two really are sisters, aren’t you?” Maria said, putting down her cup. “Both in denial.”

“My situation is nothing at all like Lydia’s,” Angela cried. “I’ve barely met Ed . . . Mr. Lancaster, whereas Humphrey might as well have moved in; he’s here so often.”

“He’s William’s companion,” Lydia said, outraged. “As well you know.”

Maria laughed loudly, putting out a calming hand in each direction. “Enough, ladies. I am teasing. I am certain all will right itself in the end.”

I hope so, Angela thought, not only in relation to herself, but for Lydia, too. More than anything, she wanted her sister to be content, and Lord Brighton did not seem to fit that picture.

Chapter 13

Edward turned the page of his book, only to realize he had read an entire paragraph without absorbing a single word. He had no idea what he'd read! He slammed the book closed in frustration and let it fall onto the table in front of him with a thump.

It had been like this for days. He loved to learn and to read, but it seemed that at the moment, all he could think of was Angela. The words on the page simply merged into images of her, daydreams of her, visions of her, and as frustrating as it was, he found he only *wanted* to think of her.

“You’ve become quite the romanticist, Edward Lancaster,” he muttered, looking down at the book and wondering if he would ever get his wits back.

When he'd agreed to attend the season with James, he had not expected to become so personally embroiled in his own romance, and yet a head full of thoughts of Angela had become his natural state. If he didn't know any better, he might even say he was falling for her—he was most certainly smitten and he strongly considered pursuing a proper courtship.

He sat back in his seat and gazed out of the window, the sun beginning to fade, filling the sky with a marble of pink and purple and the beginnings of a fiery red. He smiled to himself, as thoughts of Angela always made him do.

He'd never truly understood how *easy* it could be, just being with someone. Angela calmed his soul and thrilled him wildly all at the same time, and he was certain she felt the same way.

"It will be strange to thank my dear cousin for needing to be chaperon since it has led me to a most wonderful woman," he

muttered under his breath with a chuckle.

It truly did feel as if fate had brought them together, as fanciful as he thought that sounded, and if it wasn't for James needing chaperoning, he and Lady Angela would have never met again. However, that also stifled him from shifting his focus to possibly pursuing Lady Angela. Edward would be eager to pursue a deeper attachment once his duties to James were completed.

There was a bit of resentment towards his cousin, not only for how their relationship had been over the years, but also for him possibly trying to court Lady Angela's sister as an easy target for marriage. Edward felt that if Lady Angela heard of this it would ruin his chance at getting to know her more. It seemed that no matter what, his cousin almost always affected his life negatively. With a deep sigh, Edward rose from his seat and went to lean against the window frame, looking up at the sky.

Red for danger, he thought. *But danger of what?*

James, that was what. He knew it already. There could not possibly be any danger with Angela. Edward and James had never been close, their relationship always stifled and difficult. But now, spending the whole season in close quarters with him, all Edward felt was deep disappointment.

James Lancaster truly was an embarrassment to the Viscount title, bringing shame on the Earl's good and honorable name. Oh how Edward wished he could fix it—or at least somehow make James see the error of his ways.

But alas, James was James and Edward knew there was no changing him. If James was possibly successful in obtaining favor in Lady Lydia, would Angela resent him for not stopping it or in some case, believe that he encouraged it to fulfill his commitment to his uncle?

He could have—should have—stopped him. But who was he to get in the way of a possible courtship? Perhaps, the vile things that he heard at the ball were just James showing off to the group of young lads that seemed to idolize him. He most likely was drunk and decided to chase after a different lady instead.

What if she no longer wants me if James is successful in securing a courtship with her sister? He will surely show his true colors to them once the marriage is secured.

It was a silly thing to think about. Neither he nor Angela would have a say in whom their respective relative decided to court. Edward looked over the small garden, their London home nothing compared to the grounds of Nordshire Manor. It was only a few feet squared, with iron railings at the far end that separated the house from the street, but it was well-tended and beautiful all the same, and it continued around the side of the house to a more significant garden at the back.

The street had quieted now, though as a backstreet it was never particularly busy, and so it made Edward stand up straighter in curiosity when a coach rolled to a stop in front of the house.

It was not one of their own—it was lacking the Nordshire crest—and yet he had a twinge of recognition. He had seen that coach, those markings, before. He narrowed his eyes and stared, and that's when it hit him. He gasped and took a step backwards, letting the muslin curtain fall back into place.

It's a Dorset coach!

Edward's whole body went into panic, his mind blank yet screaming at him. What were the Dorsets doing here? Was Angela calling on him or was this for different business? He returned to his desk and busied himself with some papers, hoping to pretend he had not noticed, when he heard James' bright voice in the entrance hall.

“Edward?” he called. “Are you home? And where’s the blasted butler? I do not appreciate having to hang up my own coat, and I have guests!”

Guests!

Edward’s eyes widened and he took in a deep, juddery breath. He crept to the doorway and peered around. James was directing his guests into the cloakroom to hang up their own cloaks, much to Edward’s shame.

“I gave him the night off,” Edward said weakly. “He was feeling unwell and we had no plans.”

“Well, plans change,” James said back at him, then in a quieter tone, he said to his guests how dreadfully sorry he was for the

inconvenience.

“You didn’t think to hire a different butler to stand in for him? For goodness’ sake, dear cousin, you must always have staff at the ready to receive guests.”

“You have guests?” Edward asked, changing the subject though unsure he wanted to. His heart thumped heavily in his chest, and his mouth had filled with sand.

“Yes. We’ll throw a feast! Unless you’ve given the cook the night off also,” James said with a laugh that seemed too playful for his usual behavior. This made Edward look in the direction of the voice quizzically.

“Of course not,” Edward said. He still had not come fully out of the room, his body half-hidden by the wall. “What is the occasion?”

“All will be revealed, dear cousin.”

The three guests came out of the cloakroom as one, and each turned their eyes upon Edward. But it was only one set of eyes that stopped Edward’s breath. Lady Angela looked as radiant as ever, but she had an annoyed look on her face.

“G . . . good evening, all,” he managed, though even he knew he sounded weak. He cleared his throat and stood straighter in the library entrance. “Welcome to our home.”

“This is Lady Lydia, Lady Angela, and the young Duke of Dorset. Have you met them before?” James asked.

“I’ve had the pleasure, yes. Except for His Grace of course,” Edward replied, finally stepping out of the library. Even he knew he

could not hide forever. He walked to the group and bowed his head to them and shook the Duke's hand before turning to his cousin. "Is Lord Somerset not dining with us as well?" he asked.

"No," James replied sharply. "Humphrey will not be joining us and I don't think he will be any time soon either."

"Oh," Edward said, entirely unsure how to reply to that.

He looked briefly at Lady Lydia. She held a pleasant smile and looked regal in her stance. The young Duke, on the other hand, tried to show a face of indifference but had an annoyed look on his face as well. At just fourteen, he could be forgiven for not having learned how to school his expressions. Edward could not tell how either sibling felt, but he hoped that they would enjoy his and James' company at dinner.

As for the last of their guests, Edward noticed that even with Lady Angela giving him a kind nod, her movements were rigid. He noticed that her face soured every time she looked at James, and that she did her best to keep some distance between them. For propriety? Edward did not know. Perhaps, they would have a chance to talk about her mood later on in the day.

* * *

The cook and the maid set the dishes of food on the table as everyone settled in. It was a feast but not that overwhelming or grand. As they proceeded to plate their meals, James called for their attention as he arose from his seat, beaming with an odd pride.

Pride in his audacity, no doubt.

“Edward, you are probably wondering why I have brought these

lovely guests to our home this evening,” he said. Edward tilted his head by way of agreeing. “I wish to announce that Lady Lydia Stanley and I have begun a courtship.”

James looked down at Lady Lydia, who still held her pleasant smile. “It was a long couple of weeks, but I feel that the right decision has been made and perhaps, soon there will be a declaration of marriage. Isn’t that right, darling?”

“It seems to be the case, Lord Brighton. Here’s to new opportunities,” Lady Lydia said calmly as she held up her glass and took a sip. “But really, there was no need to make a grand announcement, my lord.”

“Nonsense, my dear. I want the world to know of it.”

He raised his glass of wine in the air as if to toast the other

guests, but they merely nodded their heads as they raised their glasses. Neither the Duke nor Lady Angela seemed enthusiastic about the news. Once done, James sat back down and began to eat.

“Goodness,” Edward said, feigning a surprise he didn’t really feel, though in truth, he felt concerned for Lady Lydia. “I suppose I ought to offer the happy couple my congratulations,” he said.

“Thank you,” Lady Lydia replied as she continued eating.

Edward felt as if the room held an awkwardness as they ate their meal. He was confused by the current behavior of his cousin, him being somewhat tolerable to be around now, yet everyone at the table seemed to merely go through the motions of polite dining and conversation.

He looked down at his plate, feeling Angela’s stare burning into

his cheeks. He refused to look up, instead focusing intently on the simple dish of chicken and potatoes with a little salad that had been placed in front of him.

Of all the days to have the simplest fare, James would decide to bring guests. A gathering like this required more exciting and tasty dishes. It felt rather embarrassing to Edward, even though he was not master of the household. If only they'd come the night before, when they'd had pheasant. It seemed to Edward to be an omen of James and Lydia's future together: bland and uninteresting.

Even though he did not look at her, he wondered what was going through Lady Angela's head. There was something bothering her and he did not know what it could be. Had James done or said something uncouth to her before their carriage ride?

Already, the conversation had died, and each of the diners merely focused on their food, the sound of knives across porcelain and

the clink of glasses filling the otherwise silent room. Edward shifted uncomfortably. It was awkward, certainly, but made worse by the awkward smile he tried to give Lady Angela. He desperately wanted to talk to her to get to the truth of the matter. But it would have to be done in private.

“Is everyone enjoying the season thus far?” he asked in a vain attempt to get a conversation started again.

“Yes, thank you,” Lady Lydia replied politely, though she did not expand on that.

“I am having the most wonderful time,” James said, his voice full of ego as he began to talk of himself and his ‘adventures’ in London. Granted, he skipped the more salacious details, which Edward was grateful for. He didn’t know how Lady Lydia or her siblings would respond to such stories so soon after James’ announcement of courtship.

Edward felt the warmth in his cheeks, embarrassed at his cousin's boastful behavior. Even with the facade of being a gentleman, James' true personality showed through the cracks.

"As much as your adventures 'inspire' us all, what other things do you propose we talk about?" Edward asked, glaring at James.

"This is meant to be a celebration," James said. He picked up his wine and drank it in a single gulp, then signaled to the maid for another. "Are you not joining in another?" he asked, looking pointedly at Edward.

"No, I'm fine, thank you," Edward replied through tight lips.

James sighed loudly. "I shall celebrate alone then."

“I’ll have a glass of wine,” the young duke said.

“Good job, young man!” James beamed, then laughed.

“I think he’s far too young for heavy wine,” interjected Lady Lydia.

“I am *not*,” the Duke said, thereby demonstrating the very thing his sister accused him of. “I am almost considered an adult. I can handle stronger drinks.”

“Exactly, dear boy. Don’t be such a worry wart, my lady. Let the boy embrace the world. He’s not a baby anymore. It will all be laid at his feet, soon enough. He should enjoy it.”

As James smiled proudly at the young duke, Edward winced and looked over at Lady Lydia, whose jaw was evidently clamped shut in

an attempt not to argue back. He was impressed by her restraint.

James and the Duke held their conversation and it seemed that James was trying to get to know the young man better, which was very uncharacteristic of his cousin. Edward assumed that James was either being genuine in his efforts to get to know his possibly new extended family or putting on a charade to look the part of a charming dinner host.

“I’m interested in books as well,” the young duke replied. “What are either of you reading, Lord Brighton and Mr. Lancaster?”

“Well, I—”

“Do excuse me,” Angela said, getting up from her seat. “I feel faint and in need of some air.”

Edward looked at her—truly looked at her—for the first time that evening, their eyes meeting for a brief moment before she brushed past his chair. The anger he saw there crushed his heart and killed the words in his throat.

“The delicate flower needs air,” James said, a smirk across his face. “Ladies are so easily overwhelmed; one would think they are made of glass.”

He snorted with laughter, much to the horror of poor Lady Lydia, whose cheeks had reddened deeply and whose wide eyes spoke of embarrassment and humiliation at his joke. The Duke’s cheeks were also red, though with fury more than anything else. Angela ran out of the room without saying a word.

Edward turned his furious eyes on James, his jaw tight with rage. He wanted to scold James on his insensitive joke but he knew he needed to check on Lady Angela.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said, rising from his own seat. He needed more than anything to get away from the table. Away from James. “I need a relieve myself.”

“No need to announce it to the world, cousin,” James called after him.

Edward gritted his teeth and didn’t look back, instead weaving his way through the house and out through the back door, onto the terrace.

It was dark now, and the air was cool upon his skin. He looked up at the moon, embracing the freshness and taking a long, deep breath, settling his beating heart and his racing thoughts.

James’ behavior was getting worse, not better, and Edward

dreaded what was to come. It was as though his cousin thought finding a wife gave him permission to not strive for better treatment of others even when jesting.

Foolish man.

Edward stiffened when he heard a sound, his body straightening and his ears pricking to listen carefully. *Yes!* There it was again, the sound of crying.

He spun around on the spot and then he saw her. Angela was huddled at the far end of the terrace, her back to him, but the cream of her gown bright against the darkness of the trees. Her shoulders shuddered as she sobbed, and Edward's heart broke at the sight.

His poor Angela, his poor love. And it was all thanks to him. He paused for a moment, unsure what to do, then cursed his hesitancy.

This was his chance to finally talk to her.

He took a few tentative steps towards her, a hand raised out though he didn't dare touch her.

“Angela?” he asked, his voice as soft as moonlight.

She spun around with surprising energy and glared at him once more. “What do you want?” she snapped. “Are you here to make jokes of me as well? I am most certainly not in the mood to be a laughing stock.”

Edward felt himself sag with the weight of his regret and his sadness, and the fury he felt at James. “Angela, please,” he said. “I apologize for my cousin's behavior. But you have been distracted since you arrived. Do you wish to talk about it?”

He hoped that his sincerity was shown on his face, yet Lady Angela only looked at him darkly. “I do not wish to discuss anything. Go back to the table with the others.”

Chapter 14

Edward stood in place as if slowly digesting her words. She wanted to be alone, to compose herself and prepare to go back to the dining table and pretend to be happy for her sister. Angela gathered her skirts and walked across the terrace towards the door. She pushed past Edward, her shoulder touching his.

She was almost there when she felt a strong hand grasp at her arm and stop her.

“Wait, Angela, please. Talk to me.”

She spun around, furious at Edward and made even more furious that the sound of his voice still made her heart sing. She’d stopped crying now, but the tracks of her tears on her cheeks were cold in the wind.

She turned towards the opening of the sky, trying her best to cool her emotions. “I could not sit there and listen to your cousin when I know that he is not a decent man. My sister deserves better than him.”

“I understand how you feel. I thought he was changing his ways based on his behavior tonight, but I can see the cracks showing. Maybe I wish to be optimistic that he will turn himself around,” Edward said to her as he put his hands to his side.

“It’s not just the rumors. He said some things to me that I dare not say to anyone else. And I wish to protect my sister.” She had been holding in her true feelings, wanting to make the best of the situation since her sister was finally allowing someone to enter her heart, even if that was not Lord Somerset.

“What has he said to you? Has he harmed you?”

Angela turned and faced Edward fully now. Her lip quivered but she did not shed anymore tears. If she wished to confide in anyone about this, it would be Edward. He seemed genuine and cared for her feelings. But was he too putting on a charade like his cousin?

“He told me that I should be happy that anyone was taking an interest in my sister. He commented on how other men who tried to court her spoke of her poorly and said she was beastly. He also said that if my sister was not in the picture, he would have tried to court me since I was young and ripe for the picking.”

It took all her will power to not cry again. She didn't want to tell her sister these horrid things, nor did she want to tell William, who would surely try to fight Lord Brighton and possibly get hurt. But it was to be expected, right? Women of society were merely seen as pones and trinkets to men like him. “That is inexcusable behavior, Angela. He should not have spoken to you in that manner. I will have a word with him—”

“No. Please don’t.”

She grabbed his hand and looked at him with pleading eyes. She herself did not know what the correct course of action would be. She could only hope that her sister was making a calculated move in agreeing to this courtship.

“It is my own fault, more than anything,” she said, feeling the truth of it in her heart. “I am protective of my older sister. Ever since the carriage accident. I took it upon myself to question Lord Brighton’s motives, but I never thought he would be so open about it. He thought my sister would be easily swayed by his calling because of her disfigurement.”

“No,” Edward said with a look of guilt. “I should have told you once I heard of his intentions, even if he was drunk. I brushed off his comments and thought nothing of it. Now I see the folly in that.

Please forgive me.”

She turned, her anger simmered down to hurt now, and she softened her gaze on him. If there was an expression of sorrow and apology, then Edward’s was it. His regret shone out from his eyes and she could see how desperately he wanted to talk to her.

I have been such a fool!

It was true; she should have seen the truth sooner. It all made so much sense, and she couldn’t quite believe she had missed it.

“All those times at those other balls, you saw them together and did not think to tell me?”

“I know. I’m sorry. Nothing I say will ever be a satisfactory answer, but please know that I never meant to keep this from you. My

naïve and optimistic mind believed he was changing. I want him to change more than anything, at least for my uncle's sake. I thought your sister was helping him in that regard. Giving him more structure and stability."

She scoffed and looked away. "I can understand that, at least."

He paused, nodding his agreement, and then said, "I was also terrified it would ruin our blossoming friendship."

"No," she said, the cold rising up in her once more. "Your lies have done that instead. And now you expect what from me? Pity? Understanding?"

She stopped, the words breaking as she said them, her eyes filling with tears once more. She didn't want to cry in front of him, but it seemed she could not help it.

“Oh, Angela,” he said, taking a tentative step forward.

He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. He offered it to her, but she looked at it without taking it, uncertain whether she wanted anything of his. She was so angry, so hurt, and yet . . .

“Take it,” he said.

He dipped his head in an attempt to catch her eye and she looked up at him through her lashes and the tears that clung to them.

“Please?” he asked. “You know, all I want is for you to smile. I’ve grown particularly fond of that smile, and I hope to see it much more often in the future.”

Quite without her control, a smile grew on her face, though she quickly banished it, leaving her lips twitching. She reached out and took the handkerchief, her heart jumping.

Does he mean it?

It had been an awful day, truly awful. That pig of a man, Lord Brighton, had turned up at their door and declared he and Lydia were courting. Then he dragged them all to his townhouse with celebration in mind, though he was the only one who thought there was anything to celebrate.

The flames of her fury at James' presence in their lives were only fanned by Edward's presence in the house. Her day got worse by the minute, and the uncomfortable dinner and James' smart remarks hadn't helped, either.

But now . . . Now Edward spoke the sweetest, kindest words, and she wasn't sure whether she believed it—or even if she *wanted* to believe it. Could he really mean it? Could it truly mean he was interested in courting her?

“Angela?”

“I’m sorry,” she croaked, shaking her head of such fanciful thoughts.

Of course he was not interested in courting her. He was being nice, nothing more! An uneasy thought of him being just like Lord Brighton due to their relation, devious and arrogant, was quickly shaken from her mind. She was letting her imagination run away with her.

“You are not the one to be sorry,” he said.

She could sense his nervous unease, the way he hovered around her, unsure of the right course of action.

“I’m sorry for being emotional,” she replied, offering him a weak smile.

“You are being true to yourself, and that is more important than anything in the world. Will you come and join me on the bench?”

She looked over her shoulder to where she had spotted the white stone bench earlier on. The thick legs had been carved to look like scrolls and the back to look like the pages of a book flopping open. She’d admired it even in her emotional state. She looked back at him and nodded.

“Will you give me a chance to explain?” he asked once they were

seated. Firelight flickered from the window behind them, casting a soft glow over them both.

“Really, there is no need,” she said, and she meant it. “I was hurt when I realized the truth, but I also should have seen it earlier. And in all honesty, while I am upset with you, I am more upset that Lydia has gotten herself into this situation. She is so close to ruining her entire life, when she was on the cusp of true love.”

“With Lord Somerset,” Edward said. It was not a question, but Angela nodded anyway.

“I’m dreadfully worried for her. I don’t understand why she would choose to see Lord Brighton over Lord Somerset,” she admitted, her eyes flicking up to that handsome face, the one she’d dreamt about all these nights, before she looked back down at the hands clasped neatly in her lap.

Edward took a deep breath. “James and I have never got along. I was telling the truth at the ball, when I said I was here for my uncle. He requested I accompany James and help him find a wife. I thought I would hate every second of it, but . . .”

“But what?” she asked, her heart beginning to race again. Perhaps he was enjoying living with a rake and behaving badly.

“But I met you, and everything changed. I do not approve of James’ actions—I never have. And I have not enjoyed being here with him. But I found you again, and that makes it all worth it.”

Her cheeks pulled into a smile again, and this time, she did not resist it. It didn’t matter what his family situation was, and the issues with Lydia would resolve themselves. All that mattered right then, in that instance, were those kind words Edward had said.

“Do you really mean it?” she asked.

“More than I’ve ever meant anything in my life,” he said with a light chuckle. His expression turned serious and she frowned, her brows creasing. “But I do worry for your sister,” he admitted.

“So I am not wrong to be concerned?”

“No, you’re not wrong at all. James is . . .” He paused, sighed, pursing his lips as he thought of an explanation. “James cares only for himself and what he can gain. Even if that means hurting others.”

“But what can he gain from courting my sister? It is clear he has no soft feelings for her.”

“My uncle told him that if he did not marry, he would be disinherited and stripped of his wealth,” he said. “And it seems that he

sees your sister as an easy target.”

“She is,” Angela admitted with a sigh. “At the moment, at least. She believes love is beyond her, and I think deep down she fears being left a spinster. Your cousin came into our lives at an opportune time, just as Lydia was beginning to open herself up to develop feelings for Lord Somerset—along with all the insecurities *that* brings.”

Angela glanced up at Edward. She knew exactly how that felt. How meeting someone and falling for them was both the most exciting and most terrifying thing in the world. She understood perfectly how insecurity can make one do the silliest of things, such as run out of a dinner party to cry on the terrace.

“Angela,” Edward said softly, taking her hand in his.

That touch, the warmth of his palm against hers, sent a shiver

through her spine, and Angela pushed her lips together to stop herself from letting out a whimper.

“Yes?”

“We must respect your sister’s wish to go through this, but believe me, I promise I will do my very best to keep an eye out for your sister. I will do everything in my power to ensure that James does not hurt her.”

“Thank you,” Angela said, feeling such warm emotion for him, and hoping he felt it too. “I cannot even begin to explain how grateful I am for that.”

“Anything,” he said, looking into her eyes. He still had not let go of her hand, and she didn’t dare move in case he did. “For you.”

Angela licked her lips and looked away, up at the starry night sky, though she, too, did not move her hand. She had to focus on something else, on something other than the feelings that were stirring inside her.

“It is with great regret, but I have come to accept that Lydia would never get to be with Lord Somerset. The pair, they . . .” She let out a small unbelieving laugh. “They are so perfect together, and they have lost that already.”

“I know,” he said softly.

He ran his thumb across the back of her hand, the movement like fireworks across her skin. She turned to look at him, her eyebrows crossed in a question.

“Do you think anyone will ever be able to marry for love, or is it

all just another lie?”

“I cannot believe that,” Edward said, holding her gaze intently.

Angela swallowed, staring at him, into him. Watching as he moved slowly, slowly, closer to her. Her breath stopped, her body tensed. She let her mouth fall open, just a touch, as she prepared for what she knew was about to happen.

His lips met hers, a feather’s touch against her mouth, and she inhaled his manly scent. How rich and earthy, how true and real. She let herself relax into him, pushing her lips back against his, taking his feather’s touch and turning it into fire.

Edward leapt back abruptly, his eyes wide with desperate fear and embarrassment. He shook his head, his gaze darting all over her face while Angela sat back too, her fingers moving up to touch her

lips, her breath heavy and rapid.

“Goodness, I’m terribly sorry,” he said quickly. “I . . . I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I . . . No, I . . .”

Angela was too shocked to properly reply—both at his actions and her own—and she looked quickly to the floor. Edward jumped out of his seat.

“I . . . I’d best get back inside. Who knows what James is up to.”

He left, evidently flustered and dashing back through the door into the house. Angela remained still for a long moment, trying to take it all in. That kiss . . . it had been perfect. Improper, yes, but so very perfect, too.

Eventually, and after a deep, steadying breath, Angela wandered back into the house, already wondering what could possibly happen next.

Chapter 15

Since the day of the dinner—the day of the kiss—things had gotten better and better for Edward and Angela. They had been courting unofficially, cautiously and surreptitiously, not wanting to cause further issues for Lady Lydia, and wanting to avoid any harsh words from James.

Edward had thought her beautiful before, but the more time he spent with Angela, the more her beauty showed itself. It shone out of her, as though she held a candle in her heart, and everything about her made her seem all the more wonderful.

She made him laugh, and she excited him. They talked of everything, from things as banal as the weather to deep and meaningful conversations about philosophy and politics and ethics. They both loved to read, and while it was true that Angela indulged in fanciful novels from time to time, she also adored reading learned

literature and treatises—anything that would help her expand her mind.

She was kind and loving, too. She'd told him all about her lessons with the common girls, where she taught them to read. He'd heard, over the years, of a young noble lady who offers paupers a chance to learn. James and Aunt Eugenia had mocked the very idea of someone lowering themselves in such a way. But even back then, Edward had thought it the most wonderful, kindly thing.

Now, whenever he was alone, Edward found himself wistful and lighthearted, his thoughts full of Angela and of a life they could have together. And, of course, that kiss. The memory of it filled his heart and kept him going, praying that one day he would get a chance to do it again.

Perhaps on our wedding day.

He gasped at the thought, though admittedly it was not the first time he'd had it. It was his secret desire, a wish he kept hidden even from himself, to see Angela in a wedding gown, walking down an aisle to meet him.

"You've really turned into a hopeless romantic," he muttered to himself, shaking his head.

"What are you doing hiding away in here?" Edward looked up in surprise to find James in the doorway to the study.

"Studying," he said simply.

"Don't you think you've done enough of that in recent years?" James asked with a snort of laughter. "How long were you in Oxford again?"

“We don’t all have an easy life ahead of us, James,” Edward said, glaring at his cousin. “Some of us have to work for a living.”

“So do I,” James said defensively. “I think having a wife—and especially one like Lydia—most definitely counts as work.”

He laughed, but Edward ignored him. “I *like* studying, James. It’s good for the mind. What do you want?”

“Come to the club with me?”

“Offended all your friends, have you?” Edward asked, wondering why James was asking him to go.

“As crazy as it sounds, it is possible for someone to want to spend time with you, Edward. I know, I know, I didn’t believe it either, at first. But it appears you are my first choice for a drink.”

Edward narrowed his eyes at him. He didn't believe a word of it. James was up to something, but he decided to play along.

"All right," he said, getting up from his seat and pulling his tailcoat from the back of the chair. "I'll join you. But we're not staying out all night."

"Of course not," James said in mock outrage. "We couldn't possibly keep you out after dark now, could we? You might turn into a pumpkin."

* * *

When they arrived at the gentlemen's club, Edward was not surprised to find two other men there, already heavily under the influence of too much whisky.

“Albert, Gregory,” James said, nodding to them. “You know my cousin, Edward?”

“We’ve met,” Edward said with a disapproving frown as he took his seat. “What are you up to, James?”

“I’m up to nothing,” he said.

“If you’re up to nothing, I’m the King’s mother,” Albert said, laughing through his nose as though that was the funniest thing in the world.

“And very maidenly you look, too,” James replied.

“Whatever this ‘nothing’ is, can we have some too?” Gregory

asked. “Your ‘nothing’ always turns out exciting.”

“Anyone would think I have a reputation,” James said with a snigger. He clicked his fingers and summoned the footman, demanding a round of whisky.

“Not for me, thank you,” Edward said.

“Yes,” James said firmly. “For him, too.” He turned to look at the annoyed Edward. “It’s a celebration.”

“Another one?” Edward asked, an eyebrow raised.

James tilted his head and made a musing sound. “It’s quite similar to the last, I must admit.”

“Big win at the races, was it?” Albert asked.

The footman placed the four glasses on the table and they each picked one up, Edward included. If James was going to insist on all this, Edward decided he might as well try to get it over with as quickly as possible.

“It’s a payout,” James said, a teasing twinkle in his eye. “But no. I am getting married.”

“Married? You? Don’t make me laugh,” Gregory said. “You’re the bachelor of all bachelors, the one we all look up to.”

“But alas, that’s all about to change,” James said.

Edward couldn’t respond. He couldn’t even drink his whisky. The thrumming of his blood rushed through his ears and his breath had

become shallow and weak. It had only been two weeks ago that he had announced his courtship to Lady Lydia. Now he was engaged?

“So who is the lucky lady?” Albert asked, still staring in disbelief.

“Lady Lydia Stanley, the Duke of Dorset’s older sister,” he explained.

Her name was like another stab to his chest, its force winding him, and his mouth hung open, his jaw working up and down as he tried to take this in. It had happened so suddenly, mere weeks since they announced their courtship! And James had told him nothing of this plan. Not a thing.

Edward had sworn to Angela that not only would he look out for Lydia, but that he would also tell Angela of any changes, anything drastic that might happen. But he hadn’t known! He could only

imagine the turmoil Angela was in right now.

“What’s happened to your cousin?” Gregory asked, his eyes on Edward but his words directed to James.

“Stunned by how well I’ve done, probably,” James quipped, then turned to Edward. “Is that the case?”

Edward took in a deep breath, blinking, regaining his wits, and he allowed himself a little chuckle, though it was not a genuine one.

“I suppose I ought to offer my congratulations then,” he said.

“You could say it with a bit more enthusiasm,” James said. “This is a celebration, not a commiseration.”

For you, perhaps.

Edward couldn't imagine Angela thinking of it as such. He took another deep breath and tried again, mustering as much fervor as he could manage.

"It certainly is," he said. "Again, my congratulations. Lady Lydia is a lovely woman; you have done well."

James let out a raucous laugh, accompanied by the trilling of his two drunken friends. Edward ground his teeth together, not enjoying the sound a single bit. It was malicious and spiteful.

"Lovely?" James said once he'd re-caught his breath. "I'd hardly describe her as that. She looks like she has the plague, but she'll be profitable, at least."

“Cow’s backside, more like,” Gregory said. “Will you have her walk with her good side always facing you like in those ancient Egyptian drawings?”

Edward looked from one to the other in absolute horror. James reached a new level of low every time they spoke!

“I really don’t think you ought to speak of your future wife like that,” he said as calmly as he could manage. “She and her siblings have been through a lot after the death of their parents. Lady Lydia sustained her scars from that accident but did not lose her wit and kind heart. You should show her more respect.”

“Nonsense,” James said. “She’ll belong to me soon enough, just like the farm’s pigs belong to me. I’ll be able to do and say whatever I wish, and she won’t be able to do anything about it.”

“Are you going to keep her locked up, too, or cover her ‘beauty marks’ like they did decades ago,” Albert asked, causing another round of guffaws.

“There is no need for such talk,” Edward said, trying once more to quell the excitement. Their words made him feel sick to his stomach.

“You’ve always been such a good boy, haven’t you, Edward?” James taunted. “There really is no need to be. She’ll get her fair share of benefit from this—work, mostly, I admit, but I will give her a child or two. Of course, I’ll have to think of someone else whilst I’m doing it . . .”

“Like Lady Margaret?” Albert asked, eyes wide with excitement. “She’s a pretty one. I wouldn’t mind a piece of her.”

“Or that maid you’ve got,” Gregory said, nodding at James. “The one with the red hair.”

“Or like Lydia’s own sister, Angela. Now there’s a beautiful girl—and she looks as if she’d be a lot of fun. Maybe once we’re married, I can persuade her to play . . .”

“You are truly disgusting,” Edward snapped, pushing back his chair with a loud rumble across the floor. “All three of you should be ashamed, but especially you, James.”

“Me?” James looked up at him, the picture of innocence, a hand to his chest.

“You’re a useless cad and a revolting human being. Good day to you, gentlemen. I will not sit here and listen to this any longer.”

Edward turned and stormed from the club, hearing their cackling laughter follow him all the way to the street. He had never before felt so enraged!

Poor Lydia! The facade she fell for will soon wither away.

And, more to the point, poor Angela. To hear the woman he was falling in love with spoken about as though she was nothing more than a prize horse made him want to scream with anger. He had to get to her, and the sooner the better. He'd made the mistake of holding back far too many times already. He stepped out onto the road and hailed his coach.

* * *

"Angela?" Edward rushed in behind the butler, already sensing the somber mood of the house. "Thank goodness."

“Edward,” she said softly. “What are you doing here?”

“I came as soon as I heard. James didn’t tell me what he was planning and—”

“It’s all right,” she said.

She looked exhausted, dark circles beneath her eyes and a weak smile. He didn’t think she’d been crying, though, and he was glad of that at least.

“What’s happened?”

“Lord Somerset has been here,” she said, turning from him and wandering aimlessly to the couch. He followed and sat next to her.

“Lydia has just told him of her engagement to Lord Brighton. He seemed positively devastated by the news.”

“And what of you? Of Lydia?”

“I am also devastated, if I’m honest. I was so desperately hoping it would all . . . sort itself out, I suppose. I thought it might disappear, if we all ignored it for long enough. Lydia is putting on a smile, pretending all is well. But we all know it’s not, of course.”

“I’m so sorry,” Edward said, leaning forward though not daring to take her hand or touch her, not whilst the housekeeper was still in the room. “I wish I could have intervened, but James didn’t tell me what he was planning. But in truth, I have no power over who he chooses to wed.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said, offering him a smile. “I know you

would have done your best to stop it.”

“If I’m honest, I don’t understand your sister’s motives. Why would she agree to marry him?”

Angela sighed and turned to look out of the window. “I don’t know either. It is clear that Lord Brighton is a master of deception and putting on a lovely demeanor for Lydia when in her presence. But another thought I have is fear, I suppose. Your cousin wooed her with all manner of benefits as well, including the chance to run his estate, and Lydia probably thought it was her best option when William takes over the Dorset estate. It’s not her best option, but she can’t see that.”

“We’ll fix this, Angela. I don’t know how, but I promise you we’ll fix it.”

She turned suddenly and looked at him with an intensity that

made him sit up straighter.

“Did you mean it?” she said, the slight wobble to her voice belaying her own insecurities. “All the sweet things you’ve been saying to me since we’ve been courting. Did you mean them?”

“Of course I did,” he said, his words having such meaning to them they came out forceful, strong, gushing from his very soul.

“You’re not merely looking to own me, then?” she asked, not quite meeting his gaze.

“I meant every word, every syllable, every single look of affection I’ve shown you. You mean the world to me, Angela, and that is not something I could feign.”

He paused as she looked up at him, smiling again. Her smile lit

up the entire room, making him smile in answer.

“Truly?”

He laughed. “Truer than truly,” he said. “It’s the truest thing ever. Please believe me when I say I am nothing like my cousin. I never have been, and I never plan to be.”

Angela nodded, a renewed look of determination on her features. “I’m going to stop this marriage, even if my sister can’t see reason,” she said fiercely.

Edward paused. It was the right thing to do; he knew it. “You know I cannot interfere with James directly,” he said. “But I promise that, for your sake, I will do whatever I can to help.”

Chapter 16

Two days passed, and Angela felt as if she was caught in a whirlwind of indecision, determination, and uncertainty. Lord Somerset had stormed angrily out of the house when he found out about Lydia's engagement, and though Lydia had tried to brush it off as nothing, Angela could see she was hurting.

Her sister had done nothing but ruminate for days, even avoiding her work in running the estate, which Angela had never before seen. When she wasn't locked away in her bedchambers, she was wandering the halls, wraithlike and silent.

But whenever Angela confronted her about it, Lydia insisted there was nothing wrong, that she'd made the right decision and she wasn't regretting it at all. Angela found it endlessly frustrating.

She could see her sister was hurting, but she didn't know what to do about it. To make matters worse—or better, depending on Angela's mood when she thought of it—she was in the throes of her own romance, one so powerful and strong that it was taking over her entire being.

She'd watched for a while, but eventually she had to admit that she could not help Lydia alone. So she did the only thing she could think to do; she wrote to Maria. She explained how Lydia was, though said she did not want to go into details in the letter, only stating it was an emergency of the heart.

The letter implored Maria to join them for dinner and, to Angela's great relief, Maria had replied immediately, saying that of course she would attend. Lydia had no idea, Angela was sure of it. She would not approve of her meddling if she did.

That night, Angela's heart was unquiet with nerves as she

readied herself for dinner, and she found herself in the dining room a good thirty minutes before they were due to meet.

“You’re early.”

Angela jumped at the voice, her chair scraping noisily along the hardwood floor.

“William! You startled me.”

“You’re early,” he repeated.

“As are you,” she said. She looked her brother up and down. He seemed to have taken particular care of his dress that evening. “You’re looking nice.”

“No need to sound so surprised. You said we have guests, didn’t you?”

“Maria, yes. Even so . . .”

“Now that I’m becoming a man, there’s nothing wrong with looking my best at dinner.”

Angela snorted. “You’re fourteen, William.”

He blushed but ignored her insult. “It’s important, isn’t it? Tonight, I mean. I’m guessing Lydia will tell Maria all that has happened.”

“I should hope so,” Angela said, the worry back. “And if she doesn’t, I will. The more people we can have on our side, the better our chances of convincing Lydia she is wrong.”

“Convincing Lydia of anything is near impossible, as you know,” William said. “And why should we interfere in her choice to marry that man? Even if we think he is not a good match.”

He flopped into his seat and looked over the neatly laid table. It was large and oval, covered in a white cloth trimmed with lace. At the center there was a huge vase filled with flowers picked from their own garden, and at each place setting there was a set of sparkling silver cutlery.

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try,” Angela replied. “Maria will know what to do, I’m certain of it.”

As if hearing her name, the door opened and their guest entered with Lydia.

“Maria!” Angela cried, leaping out of her chair and running across to her. William jumped up, too, and together they practically dragged her into the dining room and pushed her down onto her chair.

Angela could sense Lydia hovering behind them, uncertain, but she ignored her. She would have her time.

“How are you?” she asked, looking eagerly at Maria’s belly.

“Well, thank you,” Maria replied, looking up at Angela with a broad smile.

“You’re not very big, considering you’re with child,” William said.

“William! Don’t be so rude,” Lydia snapped, though Angela had

to suppress a laugh. How was a boy of fourteen supposed to know anything about the miracles of conception and childbirth? It wasn't his fault.

“Have you been feeling terribly ill?” Angela asked, skirting around the table and retaking her seat. She rested her elbows on the tabletop and leaned closer to Maria. “When Lady Emma’s sister was pregnant, she said it was the most awful thing and she felt nauseous for the entire time.”

“Thus far,” Maria said, patting her belly, “I’ve been lucky. But come now, I’m not here to discuss me. My poor, dear Lydia. Were you terribly upset by Humphrey’s leaving?”

Angela almost jumped for joy. She knew she could rely on Maria to not hold back. She’d barely sat down and was already at Lydia for what was going on. This was just what she’d needed.

“Of course not,” Lydia replied, though everyone in the room could sense that she was not her usual self. “And how did you know that Lord Somerset came to see me?”

“Oh Maria,” Angela said, full of pity. “He stormed out in such a hurry. You should have seen it. He was furious, I’m certain.”

She was aware of the false innocence she put into her voice, and she guessed the others were aware of it too. She was also aware that she would have to explain herself to Lydia for divulging information to Maria before she came to visit for dinner. But she didn’t care. She would do whatever it took to convince her sister to change her mind and reject Lord Brighton.

“I imagine he was not happy about Lydia’s engagement to Lord Brighton,” William added, catching Angela’s eye and continuing what she started. “And I don’t blame him. We all thought Lydia was to marry Humphrey—and a better option he would be, too.”

“Nonsense,” Lydia said over the rim of her wine glass.

“Humphrey and I were never anything other than friends.”

The audacity! Angela almost scoffed at her sister’s words—either blatant lies or obvious blindness. She and Humphrey had been as in love as anyone could get without declaring it to the world.

“But he wanted more,” Angela insisted with a raised eyebrow, refusing to let her sister get away with it. “As do you, if you would only admit it.”

“I do not,” Lydia protested. “And neither did he. His intentions were perfectly clear.”

Angela glanced over at Maria, throwing her a look that begged her to step in, to help. Maria gave her a tiny, almost imperceptible

nod. She understood.

“Then why did he leave in such a flurry?” Maria asked. “Surely he must have feelings for you.”

Angela suppressed a satisfied grin, not wanting to celebrate a victory too soon, and it most definitely was too soon.

“I gave him ample opportunity to admit to anything he felt, after you all harangued me into thinking that perhaps he felt something,” Lydia replied.

Harangued! Angela would hardly call it haranguing. Trying to make her see the truth was not nagging, was it?

“But it has become perfectly apparent,” Lydia continued haughtily, “that it was all quite in your imaginations. And no surprise,

too—”

“That’s rubbish,” William muttered, a sullen expression on his face. “And you well know it.”

No one replied. In fact, no one said a word for a long while. While Lydia squirmed uncomfortably under their gaze, Angela, William, and Maria strengthened their alliance with snatched glances and secret looks, though none of them quite knew where to go next.

Angela opened her mouth to renew her assault, but before she could speak, the door opened and a maid came in carrying a huge trifle. William leant forward, spoon in hand and greed in his eyes, but Angela slapped him away.

“Don’t you dare,” she said. “That’s for *after* our roast partridge. And it’s for us all to share!”

“Roast partridge!” Maria declared with a smile. “My absolute favorite.”

“And with blackberry sauce, too,” Lydia said. “That’s why I asked our cook to make it, since I heard you were coming.”

“You’re such a thoughtful friend, my dear,” Maria said warmly, but her smile quickly turned into a scowl and she shook her head. “But don’t think that will get you out of this conversation. Since you have made it clear that Lord Somerset is nothing more than a friend and business associate, why did you decide to accept Lord Brighton’s marriage proposal? Is he a good man?”

Angela pushed her lips together. She knew Maria didn’t know the full extent of Lord Brighton’s terrible reputation, but she hoped her prodding would cause Lydia to rethink her choice.

“That’s not normally how one congratulates someone on their upcoming nuptials,” Lydia said.

“No, it’s not,” Maria admitted. “Normally one can see the benefit of a union—one that should, of course, be love. But *Lord Brighton*! You cannot ever possibly hope to love a man like that.”

“It’s not about love,” she said. “He made a fair offer.”

Those words again. They infuriated Angela. Marriage should not be about offers, fair or otherwise, unless that offer is love. The door opened again, and the maids brought in their meals. While Angela’s attention remained on Lydia, Lydia looked pointedly at her cutlery, as though selecting her knife and fork required the utmost concentration.

“A fair offer, perhaps,” Maria urged. “But are you sure you are

not making a mistake? Convenient marriages don't always turn into loving relationships, you know. This is not like a business deal. This is not an arrangement you will be able to get out of, not once you're married and the papers are signed."

"Not without killing him, at least," William said with a snort. Angela giggled. She was not a violent sort, but if there ever was a man who could bring out that side of her, it was James Lancaster.

"Really, William," Lydia said, chastising her brother. "If you cannot have an adult conversation, then perhaps you should not dine with the adults at all."

"You're not the only one hurt by Humphrey leaving, you know," he snapped back.

Angela felt instantly sorry for him. She knew how close William

and Humphrey had become in the short time they'd been friends.

“We will find you another companion, William,” Lydia said with a sigh.

“Perhaps Lord Brighton would be willing,” Angela suggested, and then giggled from sheer discomfort.

“All right everyone,” Lydia snapped. “Let’s just eat our dinner, shall we?”

Angela focused her attention on her food, thinking that perhaps they had pushed Lydia too far. She didn’t like it when her sister snapped. It showed her fear, her sadness. But barely a few minutes had passed before Maria spoke again.

“Is the engagement official yet?” she asked. “If it’s not, there is

still time. I am certain Humphrey will return.”

Angela took a deep breath and risked a glance at Lydia, though she looked tight-lipped and calm.

“It’s not official,” she said. “Though I intend to make it so once I return home, after the season.”

“If Lord Brighton—”

“Please!” Lydia cried. The crash of her fork onto her plate made Angela jump. “Can we change the subject now?”

Maria eyed her best friend for a long moment, but eventually she nodded her agreement. “Very well,” she said. “But you know I’m here, if you wish to talk about it.”

“I do,” Lydia replied. “And I’m grateful for that.”

Angela didn’t dare look up. She carefully cut her partridge into tiny, bite-sized chunks, though none made it to her mouth. She was far too anxious to eat, even though the food looked and smelled truly delicious.

“Angela,” Lydia said suddenly, making her jump again. “Why don’t you tell us about the suitors you’ve met thus far?”

Angela let out a tiny whimper of panic. She couldn’t very well coo over Edward or tell everyone how wonderful he was, not in the middle of Lydia’s own love crisis. She wouldn’t dare rub her own happiness in her sister’s face; it would be immeasurably cruel.

Instead, she merely shrugged. “I hadn’t realized quite how many

gentlemen there were in the *ton*,” she said, thinking it best to avoid talking of herself all together. “It will take me a while to sort through them all.”

Maria snorted. “I’m not sure you’re meant to *sort through them*, my dear.”

“But then how does one find one suitable?” Angela asked, again feigning innocence in the hopes that Maria would pick up the topic and run with it.

“You’ll know love when you find it. Afterall, the three of you are in the unique situation of being able to choose who you want as a spouse instead of being forced by family to be with someone,” Maria said. She reached over and grasped Angela’s hand tightly. The act sent love to her heart, a silent reassurance that all would end well. After all, they say love conquers all.

“You’ve had many callers,” Lydia said gruffly, pulling Angela out of her reverie. “Have none of these taken your fancy?”

Angela blew out her cheeks and shrugged again. She didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t very well show off her romance. “I’ve had a lot of offers of courtship,” she said finally, deciding to settle on something tamer.

“And no surprise either,” Lydia said with a proud grin, evidently happy to have changed the focus of the conversation. “You’re both beautiful and interesting. All the eligible bachelors in London know what a catch you would be.”

And yet there is only one I want.

“So?” Maria asked excitedly. “Is there anyone special?”

William huffed. “Do we really have to talk about this again? It seems that this year all we talk about is marriage.”

“It’s very important for your sister,” Lydia chided. “Show some consideration for her, at least. Your time will come.”

As will yours, Lydia.

“There are one or two who seem interesting enough,” Angela said, trying to keep the broad smile from her face as she thought of Edward. “But I have no intention of becoming engaged to any of them.”

“Whyever not?” Lydia asked, clearly surprised by her words.

Good, Angela thought. This was her opportunity to prove her point.

“Maria and I have been talking a lot about marriage and love, the past and the future.” She looked over to Maria and smiled.

“I’ve told her all about the whirlwind romance Andy and I had,” Maria said, smiling back at Angela. “It was and still is a beautiful love.”

“The sort which is famed for its rarity,” Lydia said, nodding at Angela. She understood perfectly what her sister meant, but she wouldn’t listen.

“Rare though it may be, it is a true love. I won’t accept anything less than that kind of love,” Angela said firmly.

“And neither should you have to,” Maria said. “Love is an important part of any marriage.”

Angela could tell from Lydia's sneer that she didn't agree.

"But she's right, Lydia," she said. "I will not settle for anything less, and neither should you."

Later that evening, long after Maria had left and each of the siblings had returned to the bedchambers, Angela heard a gentle knock at her door.

"Come in," she called.

William poked his head around the door. "Are you busy?" he asked.

"Never too busy for my baby brother," she said. "Is there

something the matter?”

He slipped in and quietly closed the door, careful to ensure the latch didn't click. He sat down next to Angela, though he didn't say anything for a while. Angela allowed him to sit in the quiet, simply enjoying their unspoken familial connection.

“Why didn't you tell them about this man who keeps soaking you?” William asked eventually. “I know you've seen more of him.”

“How do you know that?” Angela asked, genuinely surprised that William had noticed anything at all.

He chuckled. “The way you lighten up after you've met with him. Your cheeks get this glow, like a firefly, and I'm always convinced they must ache from all the smiling.”

Angela looked down at her lap to hide that very smile he spoke of. “It doesn’t seem right,” she admitted. “I don’t want to talk about my happiness when Lydia is going through so much misery. I will tell her, in time, but we need to put this right first.”

William looked up at her, his expression serious. “We need to stop this farce, Angela. We need to stop this wedding.”

“Don’t worry, William,” she said firmly. “I am going to do everything in my power to break them apart.”

Chapter 17

Less than a week later, Edward and James returned to Nordshire Manor. Edward had expressed his concerns about leaving London so early, but James had insisted. He'd achieved what he set out to do—find himself a wife—and there was no further reason to remain in London. Besides, he was excited to tell his father.

Edward reluctantly agreed, but he could not rid himself of the uneasy feeling that sat within his stomach. It had begun the moment James had revealed his intentions, and it had only grown since. He'd never liked the way James behaved and this, it seemed, proved his point.

The union between his cousin and Lady Lydia was one based upon lies and manipulation, upon dishonor and cruelty. He had pondered to himself on whether or not he would be this invested in their union if he had never met Angela. Had this been a different lady,

would he have cared about the poor woman's fate? He wished he could say yes, but even in his moral upbringing, he tended to focus on himself and his family while doing the best he could to be kind and generous to others. He left their problems to them to resolve.

After spending time with the Stanley family, he realized that even if he was not romantically involved with the younger daughter, he would not have looked favorably upon the engagement of Lady Lydia and James because of his cruelty. They could have a pleasant union not founded on love, but on respect, if only James would be more mature and responsible.

But the truth was, he did have feelings for Angela, and that made him feel much, much worse. He prayed his cousin would right his wrongs, that Lady Lydia could be safe from his preying, and that Angela would not only forgive him, but would love him as well.

They've been back barely a day when the Earl asked Edward for

a game of cards. Though they played often, Edward knew instantly that there was an ulterior motive in his request. He would have, naturally, spoken to James already, and Edward suspected his uncle wanted to know his side of the tale.

He was right.

“James tells me of his engagement to Lady Lydia Stanley of the Dorsets,” Mason said as he dealt the cards across the green-felted tabletop.

He had a brandy at his side and a candle sat burning between them, the smoke of which curled up into the room. Edward watched it dance with the dust motes brought to life by the sunlight, and he wished he could be that carefree.

He leant forward and bent the cards at the corners to check what

he'd been dealt, then sat back in his chair again. "It's true," he said, though without much enthusiasm.

"That is quite a coup, I'd say," Mason replied, his eyes on the cards fanned out in his hand. "He didn't go into this half-heartedly, at least. Any man would be lucky to have a wife like her—she is renowned for her abilities when it comes to running an estate."

"And an interesting conversationalist, too, or so I hear," Edward replied. He watched his uncle carefully, curious about his true thoughts on this matter.

"I've told James we will throw a dinner this weekend to celebrate. You'll join us, won't you? You had a hand in this too."

Edward's heart sank at those words. He didn't want to be thought to have had a hand in any of it. He wished he could rid himself of the

whole sordid situation.

“I will attend if you request it of me, Uncle Mason,” he said awkwardly. “But in truth, I’m not certain there is anything to celebrate. The whole thing feels a little uncomfortable to me.”

“Why does it feel like that?” Mason asked. “How did he manage to pull this off?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I wasn’t privy to most of it, though Lady Lydia and her family came to dinner one evening after their unofficial engagement.”

“Don’t be shy, Edward,” Mason replied. “You can be truthful with me. I already know what James is capable of, don’t forget.”

“Truthfully, I suspect he preyed on her fears and insecurities.

Though she is evidently not going into this unwillingly, I did not see a whole lot of enthusiasm on her part. She was calm every time I saw her with James.”

“Ah,” Mason replied, nodding his head in understanding. He sighed and looked directly at Edward. “Marriage rarely sparks enthusiasm unless it is a love match, or so I hear. I remember my own lack of joy very well indeed. Believe me, your aunt would not have been my first choice, were it not for the mutual gain our families received.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Edward said, but he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “But the thing is, she and her siblings do not have to follow family expectations or even societal expectations of finding a perfect match since their parents are far from this world. And I doubt if they were alive, they would force their children into unhappy marriages.”

“But how can you be sure she is unhappy with her decision? Have you asked Lady Lydia or do you assume it so based on your feelings for your cousin?”

He was not entirely sure how much he agreed with that notion—or, indeed, whether that was what was happening here at all. A marriage of convenience was one thing, but there was an ignoble feel to this arrangement between James and Lydia. It felt forced and disrespectful, and it did not sit right with Edward. He admitted that he never once asked Lady Lydia directly how she felt about her engagement, but he did not feel close enough to her to ask such a question. Did she still follow societal norms?

“I can see you still have concerns,” Mason said, playing his next card. “Let me see if I can allay them a little. The lady is not lacking in intelligence. I suspect she understands the benefits of such a union, even if it does not fill her heart with happiness. It is not that she is lacking enthusiasm, but that she thinks of it in the same way that she does of her many business dealings.”

Edward shivered involuntarily. It was such a cold way to think of marriage, so hard-hearted. And again, he didn't agree.

“But when one goes into a business arrangement, it is with open eyes and a clear head. If James has, as I suspect, preyed on her weakness, I worry that Lady Lydia does not have all the facts to hand and thereby cannot make a sound decision.”

Mason chuckled and shook his head. “You worry far too much, my boy. She is a bright young thing—that much she has demonstrated time and again since her father died. I have no doubt that she has gone into this with careful consideration. If nothing else, her marriage will help her family's reputation. She has a young sister, does she not?”

Angela. Edward's heart skipped a beat at the mention of her. “I believe so. And a younger brother who is the current Duke of Dorset,”

he croaked.

“There you go,” Mason said, as though this perfectly proved his point. “The lady will be fully aware that her own marriage will help secure her sister’s future marriage. I have no doubt she will want her sister to marry into a good family, as any guardian would. An earl, at the very least, if not a duke like their brother.”

An earl or a duke. Edward swallowed back that fear. It was something that had shown itself on occasion but that he had always pushed away. Edward had no title or peerage and neither did he want one, except when it came to Angela. Without one, he knew he might have difficulties in getting their own union approved—and even more so with James at the helm, helping to make the decision.

“Dear Edward.” Mason looked at him and smiled. “You are a natural worrier. I understand that it is James’ past behavior that has led to this, but he has thrown himself into this task with a fervor that

has surprised even me. He has thought it through and come up with a viable solution to our little problem.”

“And what of Lady Lydia? What if something distasteful has gone on?” Edward asked. The cards were forgotten, the game paused.

“Have a little faith in me, at least,” Mason said, his tone tinged with gentle chastisement. “*If* there is anything untoward going on or should James demonstrate less than correct comportment in the following weeks, I shall deal with it in a way I see fit. Does that put you at ease?”

“It does,” Edward said, though it didn’t really. He trusted his uncle implicitly, of course, but he also knew James well, and he feared what was to come.

“Play along, Edward,” Mason said, his gaze steady upon

Edward's. "For the family's sake."

* * *

Edward put all thoughts of it out of his head until the night of the dinner that weekend, and he'd already decided that, while he would attend for his uncle's sake, he would not involve himself in conversation. He didn't want any part in this.

It was a relatively intimate affair, the Earl and Aunt Eugenia having invited a small number of guests. There was the Viscount of Barchester and his wife, plus Mr. and Mrs. Edwind. Lord Langley and Lady Vesty were there too.

Edward suspected his aunt had been in charge of the guest list—they were not the good, honorable people his uncle normally liked to associate with. The latter two were rumored to be engaged in an illicit

affair, while the former were known for their feelings of superiority and generally arrogant notions.

In truth, Edward was not particularly keen on any of them. They fed far too easily into James and Aunt Eugenia's self-importance and pompous natures.

"Take my seat at the head of the table today," the Earl said brightly when James entered the room. "This little party is in your honor, after all, and you deserve it."

No, you don't. Edward tried his best not to shake his head in disgust as he watched his cousin lord it over everyone, grinning as if he had won some wonderful competition. He shrank back in his seat, making himself smaller and as far away from James as he could.

"What was London like?" Lord Langley asked eagerly. "It's been

an age since I was in the city.” Edward could hear the lascivious hunger in his voice.

“The season was a bore, naturally,” James said, clearly enjoying the attention he was receiving. “But London itself has its hidden excitements, if one knows where to look. Don’t you agree, Lord Langley?”

Langley chuckled in reply and Edward gritted his teeth. Even the Earl shot his son a look, and for that Edward was grateful. His uncle was not blind to his cousin’s ways, and he was pleased to see Mason at least trying to tamper down James’ nonsense.

“Now James,” the Earl said. “You’re very soon to be a married man, don’t forget.”

“Don’t fret, Father,” James replied as plates of food were placed

in the center of the table. “Lady Lydia and I . . . we have an agreement.”

As the maids served the food, from roasted fowl and buttered potatoes to *morels a la crème* and a regalia of cucumbers, Edward avoided James’ gaze. He was terribly proud of himself, but even his own eyes gave away his true intentions.

“You’re quite the scoundrel, Lord Brighton,” Lord Barchester said with a chortle that began and ended in his nose. “I cannot begin to imagine what sort of agreement you have made.”

“But at least, soon enough, he’ll be a married scoundrel,” Lady Barchester replied, her fork pointed up in the air as if to point at the truth of her comment.

“Hear, hear,” the Earl said, raising his wine glass, as the

remaining guests broke into amused chuckles. Edward watched stony-faced.

“I, for one, think this Lady Lydia is extremely lucky to have my son on her side,” Aunt Eugenia said, a touch of snooty pride written across her features.

“Absolutely,” Mrs. Edwind proclaimed. “Such a catch.”

Edward shook his head, the taste in his mouth bitter, despite the good food in front of him. To see everyone cooing over James as though he had done something truly great made Edward feel sick to his stomach.

“Will you have a large wedding?” Mr. Edwind asked, his fork hovering over his plate.

“Of course,” Eugenia replied at exactly the same time as James shook his head. Edward suppressed a smirk—at least there was *that* disagreement for them to contend with.

“No,” James insisted. “It won’t be a large wedding. There’s no need for a spectacle.”

“And this coming from a man who adores making himself a spectacle,” the Earl quipped.

“There’s still plenty of time for that,” Lady Vesty said with a raucous laugh.

Edward understood perfectly why James, this once, did not want a spectacle. He believed that his cousin did not consider Lady Lydia worthy of being seen with, and he wanted his wedding to go as unnoticed as possible.

“I really must ask,” Lord Langley said, leaning forward conspiratorially. “How in this world did you manage to tame the ice queen?”

“Oh, good question!” Lady Vesty declared with a giggle. “We’ve all been wondering that. Rumor always was that Lady Lydia would *never* take a husband. And with all those suitors she rejected, one would think a girl in her position was the pick of the ball.”

And she would be better off for it.

“It was nothing, really,” James replied with an affected sigh. “I didn’t even try.”

“Even Lydia Stanley would not dare turn down my son,” the Countess said. “She understands how lucky she would be to marry

him. She is no fool.”

Edward took in a deep breath and bit back the words he wanted to launch across the table. He looked over at the Earl, who shot his son another warning look, but Edward couldn't understand why his uncle was not openly reprimanding him.

“Right. Who wants a cigar?” James asked once dinner was over, rising from the table.

Edward, along with the other guests, got up to follow James. There was some part of him that couldn't resist hearing more, a peculiar desire to be further disgusted by his cousin's words.

It was more than that, though. This, he thought, would give him a chance to find out absolutely everything, and he could report his findings to Angela. Even the smallest of things could help her in her

endeavor to put an end to this engagement, and Edward desperately wanted to help her in whatever way he could. Perhaps if Lady Lydia heard from her own sister how distrustful she was of James, she would reconsider breaking her engagement. She deserved better than him.

“So really,” Langley said as soon as they were in the study and the cigars were lit. “How was London? I hear you went with your cousin.”

“Edward was a bore, as he always is,” James replied, lowering himself into one of the red leather chairs.

Edward almost choked on his own breath, so surprised he was to hear those words. It was not that James thought him a bore—he knew that well enough, he’d been told so often. It was that James had quite missed the fact that Edward was in the room with them!

Still, that would work to his advantage. It meant James would speak freely, without concern about what Edward might say. He stood to the back of the room, hidden behind the thickening wall of cigar smoke, and remained quiet.

“And what of Lord Somerset?” Lord Barchester asked. “I hear you and he are no longer quite as friendly as you once were.”

James snorted. “And good riddance, too,” he said. “I felt I had no other choice but to cut off my friendship with him. I have no desire to be associated with such a weak person anymore.”

“But you two have been tied at the waist since you were children,” Lord Barchester replied, his tone almost incredulous.

“That’s why I kept up the charade for so long,” James said. “Out of respect for that and for the fact that he has been useful to me from

time to time. But in truth, we haven't been close in years."

And now you have betrayed him.

"All right, enough of that," Langley said. He crossed one leg over the other and leant back in his chair, grinning mischievously. "We all know that's not the *real* question."

"Whatever do you mean?" Barchester asked.

"I mean, the question we all want answered is this." He turned and looked directly at James. Edward's pulse throbbed with dread at what was coming. "How do you plan on bedding your new bride when she has such a hideous disfigurement? I would think it hard to look past her scars, at least on one side of her body."

James chuckled loudly, as did Lord Barchester, and Edward

closed his eyes, truly disgusted by the conversation.

“In the dark, naturally,” James said.

“There’d be no other possible way,” Barchester added.

“There is a hint of her beauty, but those scars are impossible to overlook. I can just thank my lucky stars those scars are not hereditary. At least my children will be handsome.”

“And you’ll take a mistress to satisfy your needs, of course,” Lord Langley said as though it was nothing. Edward clenched his jaw even tighter, resisting the urge to scold the lot of them.

“Of course,” James replied. “Once we are married, I can turn my attentions to other female company. All that is required is that I give her the child she so desires.”

“A mistress is vital for any happy marriage,” Barchester said. “No man can cope with a wife alone, beautiful or not.”

“One could always stay a bachelor,” Langley said smugly, “and enjoy the available fruit without paying the price.”

Edward stepped forward, his rage driving him out of the smoke even while his mind told him to stay back. His nostrils flared.

“You are talking like animals,” he snarled. “And you, James, should be truly ashamed of yourself for talking about your future wife in such a manner. Your father would certainly be ashamed!”

James looked only vaguely surprised to see Edward, and that irked him even more. He let out a loud, ugly laugh.

“Oh dear me,” Lord Langley said mockingly. “Look who’s been huddling up with your father, James. Since you have no title, young man, you will never understand the goings on of the peerage. You should stay in your place.”

“Disappointed in your cousin’s success, are you, Edward?” Lord Barchester asked, his eyebrow raised in a tease. He turned to James and laughed again. “He was probably hoping you’d fail and be disinherited, so that he could somehow grab the Earldom for himself.”

“Ah yes,” Lord Langley replied, eyes sparkling with malice. “That makes perfect sense, though it is impossible unless James dies. Is that the case, Edward? Do you want James to fail in his endeavor?”

“No . . . I . . .” Edward’s words faltered, the very notion that he wanted the Earldom for himself choking him.

“Edward? Is that true? Are you so desperate to be amongst us that you would ruin my plans or worse, kill your own flesh and blood?” James asked. His words were serious, questioning, but the expression on his face was taunting and cruel.

Edward took a step backwards, realizing he couldn’t say another word for fear that he would prove this awful rumor true. He could not allow anyone to believe such a thing, not only because it *wasn’t* accurate, but also because if he was to help Angela try to stop this marriage, then it had to be only for the most noble, honorable reasons.

No, he couldn’t say another word. He spun on his heels and marched as calmly as he could from the room, knowing that he would have to keep this horrible, poisonous conversation a secret—for everyone’s sake.

Chapter 18

Two weeks later, the Stanley family returned home as well. The season was winding down and the family felt they had had enough excitement. William had returned to school, Maria had gone back to her own house, and Lydia and Angela were left to settle back into the Dorset estate.

After the hectic season, the countryside had an appealing calm to Angela, helping to soothe her concerns and renew her determination to fix all that had gone wrong over the summer. She was excited to restart her reading lessons, and she looked forward to playing the pianoforte again.

Her one remaining fear, though, was that she would be lost to Edward for an entire year, at least until the next season came around. She'd made several friends in London, but none had interested her half as much as Edward had, and the thought of not seeing him for

months on end filled her with dread.

That's why she made some discreet enquiries while they were traveling back, made easier by the fact that Lydia was to be engaged to Lord Brighton. It was to her delight that she discovered Dorset estate was barely thirty minutes in a coach from Nordshire Manor.

They were close enough to see each other on a regular basis, and that thought excited her more than any other the entire season. She hoped only that he felt the same. That's why, on the day after they arrived home, Angela allowed herself only a small rest.

As soon as she was awake, she wrote a letter to Edward, her words scrawled quickly and eagerly across the parchment as she explained that she had returned. She told him how thrilled she was to have met him, and how much she hoped they would see one another again.

She folded it up, stamping the wax with her seal, then dabbing a little of her scent on the paper. She wanted the room to be full of her presence when he received it.

Once the note was gone, she tried to relax and enjoy being back home. She wandered through the garden, tinkered on the piano forte, and picked up a book and then put it back down again. She couldn't concentrate on anything, her thoughts only with Edward and how he would react to receiving her letter.

That's why she was so truly overjoyed when, barely four hours after she had sent her letter with the footman, the butler knocked on the door to her bedchambers.

"A letter for you, my lady," Beaumont said, the cream-colored missive just visible on the silver tray he balanced on one hand.

Angela squealed with delight and slipped her legs out from under her, leaping up from the couch with sheer excitement and running to Beaumont.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she repeated.

Beaumont looked at her with a bemused smile, blinking in surprise at her overly enthusiastic reaction, before bowing and turning to leave.

Angela didn’t hesitate in sliding her finger beneath the seal and snapping it open. She allowed herself to fall back onto the couch as she read, her cheeks pulled into a wide grin.

Dearest Angela,

I cannot describe how wonderful it was to receive your letter. I cannot

deny that my spirits have been low since returning from London, and hearing from you truly lifted my heart.

I, too, found our meeting to be heart-warming and pleasurable, and I look forward to us seeing one another again. You are correct in what you say about us living near each other.

For that reason, I wonder whether you would do me the honor of meeting me tomorrow at two o'clock at King George's Park? We could enjoy a picnic together and talk about our dreams for the future.

With the kindest regards,

Your Friend, Edward.

Angela squealed again, kicking her legs out in exhilaration, her skirts flaring up into the air. He wanted to go on a picnic! And talk

about their dreams for the future! She couldn't stop herself from imagining what that meant.

She crushed the letter to her chest and looked up at the ceiling as though she could see the heavens through it.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” she said again, allowing herself a little chuckle, though she wasn't entirely certain who she was thanking.

She leapt up from her seat and ran to her writing desk, quickly sending off a note stating her agreement and her anticipation.

* * *

The following morning, Angela had risen with the sun, and since then, she'd been unable to settle her mind or her heart. As her lady's

maid helped her dress, Angela had been particular about what she wore and how her hair was to be.

When Megan had questioned her change in behavior, Angela revealed her secret. It had to be done—Megan would be required to chaperone if Angela didn't want to tell Lydia the truth. And she didn't, at least not yet.

Megan had responded with a level of fluster and delight that almost, though not quite, matched that of Angela herself. She jumped into action, fetching this and that and bringing out Angela's true natural beauty in everything she did.

Later, through breakfast, Angela talked incessantly, garnering curious looks and prying questions from her sister. Each time, she'd carefully swayed Lydia's thoughts in another direction, laughing to herself about how easy it was to do.

Having secrets, she realized, was rather fun, and she wasn't hurting anyone by not admitting the truth. If anything, she was saving Lydia from hurtful jealous emotions. She'd even made up some story about wanting a walk in the park to connect with nature, and Lydia had believed her, warning her only to take Megan with her.

By the time she arrived at King George's Park, Angela's energy and spirits were high. As she stepped out of the coach, she spotted Edward instantly, waiting patiently by the entrance to the park.

"Oh, he's a handsome one," Megan whispered into her ear as she stepped out behind her mistress.

"Isn't he just," Angela replied, her tone wistful and her eyes stuck on Edward.

He looked out over the road, clearly looking for her though he

hadn't yet seen her. He had his hands clasped behind his back and he rocked gently on the balls of his feet, as though through nervous energy.

He wore a summer outfit, his tailcoat and trousers made of the finest linen in pale cream, his top hat made to match. And it looked to Angela that he'd paid as much careful attention to his dress as she had, the chestnut-colored hair at his cheeks full but well-tamed.

She took in a deep breath as she watched him, in awe of what she saw, and her stomach twisted with a thousand emotions, only made worse when he turned and spotted her. His eyes lit up when they landed upon her, the green sparkling like a precious jewel.

She smiled broadly at him, just staring for a moment, until she felt Megan's gentle prod against her back.

“There’ll be no picnic if you don’t go up and meet him, my lady,” she teased, her whisper tickling Angela’s ear. Angela giggled, and then made her way quickly to the handsome man who waited for her.

“Good afternoon,” he said as she arrived.

His voice was like silk, delicate and delectable to her ears, and he smiled down at her, his height making her look up at him.

“Good afternoon,” she replied, her eyes fixed on his.

“I’ve prepared a picnic,” he said, not breaking their gaze.

“I would have been annoyed if you hadn’t,” she teased, her lips twisting into a smile. “You did promise it in your letter.”

“I did,” he agreed with a nod. “Shall we go into the park? I have the perfect spot in mind, just beneath a grand old oak tree.”

He was right; it was a truly magnificent spot. The shade of the tree provided them the relief they needed from the heat of the afternoon sun, though the light glittering through the gaps in the leaves created the prettiest pattern on the ground.

They sat together on the grass, stealing glances at each other every few moments, as the maid Edward had brought along laid their food out in front of them. Megan sat within range of the two and busied herself with cross stitching.

“I have a confession,” he said, smiling at her.

She cocked her head in question. “Nothing bad, I hope.”

Edward chuckled. "I'm afraid I was not happy to see my home when I returned from London."

"No? Do you not like Nordshire Manor?"

"Oh yes," he said quickly. "I adore it, just as I adore my uncle, Mason. But being home meant I was no longer in London, and that was dreadfully disappointing."

"I thought you weren't keen on attending the season?" she asked with a giggle. He'd told her before that he wouldn't have attended it, were it not for his uncle's request. Attending balls and talking with socialites had never truly been something he'd enjoyed, apparently.

"I am not," he admitted. "Usually." He smiled broadly at her. "This year, it was different."

She felt herself blush and she looked away, pressing her lips together to try to stop the proud smile from growing.

“I had a wonderful time, too,” she said, looking up at the bright blue sky. “Though . . .”

“Though what?”

She turned to look at him, absorbing the hunger in his eyes. “Though the last two weeks were less enjoyable. There were fewer interesting people.”

“Really?” he asked, an eyebrow raised. “And, pray tell, was there anyone in particular you missed?”

“Oh, you know,” she said wistfully, looking off into the distance again. “Just this one gentleman. He’d been somewhat entertaining. I

found myself even wishing for someone to throw water all over me, for some strange reason.”

She looked at him with an expression of perfect seriousness, her laughter hidden behind feigned nonchalance. Edward, though, could not stop himself from laughing.

“I’m certain something could be arranged, if you’ve missed it that much,” he said.

Her giggle bubbled up, then, and erupted from her. “Perhaps not today,” she said.

“That’s a shame,” he teased. “Because I’ve got this lovely glass of wine here and . . .”

He pretended to throw the lot over her, though pulled the glass

back just in time. She screeched and leapt back, before breaking into furious laughter once more.

“You are a terror, Edward Lancaster.”

“And you, my dear sweet lady, are incredibly beautiful.”

Angela’s cheeks flushed deep pink and she lowered her eyes bashfully. She fiddled with the hem of her skirt.

“I’m so glad to have met you,” she said, her voice soft and full of meaning.

“And I am glad to have met you,” he said.

Angela felt herself moving towards him, as if pulled by some

magnetic force, and her heart fluttered wildly in her chest. This time, she understood what was happening and what was to come. This time, she craved it.

But before their lips could touch, they remembered they were being chaperoned and refrained from continuing but stayed close. Then a thought came to her, and she straightened up, pulling back from his reach. She could see the confusion in his eyes, but she could not allow herself to continue, not while the thought played in her mind.

“How has your cousin been since your return?” she asked. “Has he improved at all in the weeks we have been apart?”

It was unlikely, of course it was, but that didn’t mean Angela couldn’t hope for the best. Edward looked at her, his eyes telling her of his sadness and his shame. He paused, evidently not wanting to speak, but he cleared his throat and began all the same.

“He is not improved,” he admitted, shifting awkwardly in his seat. “In fact, quite the opposite is true.”

Angela frowned. “How so?”

Edward took a deep breath and, with his eyes closed, he explained to her all that had happened at the celebration dinner.

“He said some truly disgusting things, Angela. I cannot understand how he can live with himself.”

Angela had frozen, her whole body tensed and getting tenser with every word he said. To hear of her sister being spoken of in such a manner was heartbreaking, and she had no doubt that Edward hid the true extent of their words from her.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Edward said, a sense of urgency to his voice. “I honestly did try to defend your sister, but when they started accusing me of only wanting to become the heir, I—”

“It’s all right, Edward,” she said softly. “It’s not your fault. You did the best you could and you’re right, you could not very well encourage that belief.”

He looked sadly at her. “Thank you,” he said, his voice weak, and she wished she could make him feel better. But right then, she had more important things to worry about.

Such as her sister, and this upcoming marriage.

“Edward, I need you to escort me home,” she said.

He looked at her wide-eyed, and she only nodded. “But Lady

Angela . . .”

“I know. Our meetings were meant to be clandestine, for the time being at least. But I think this information might be just what we need to put a stop to this nonsensical engagement, and it is worth revealing our friendship in order to do that.”

“You’re certain?” he asked, holding her gaze for a moment.

“I’m certain,” she repeated. “We have to tell Lydia everything you have just told me. She has to see the folly in her decision to wed your cousin.”

Chapter 19

“Where is my sister?” Angela demanded as soon as she entered their home. Beaumont took a step back, a little shocked by her bluster as he took her bonnet from her.

“She’s in her study,” he said before turning his eyes on Edward.

“A pleasure, Mr. Lancaster. Can I take your hat and coat?”

“There is no time for that,” Angela said. “Come on, Edward.”

She reached back and grabbed Edward’s arm, then near enough pulled him through the entrance hall and towards the study. As they went, she could hear Beaumont’s utterances of surprise and the beginnings of questions, but Megan entered just after them and kept him busy with her chatter.

Thank you, Megan.

“Slow down,” Edward urged. “The information will not lessen if we go at a reasonable pace.”

“No,” Angela said, glancing only briefly over her shoulder at him. “This is what we’ve needed!” She stopped suddenly then and turned to him, her eyes bright with accusation. “You *do* want to help me stop this wedding, don’t you?”

“Of course I do! I cannot believe you would even ask such a thing,” he cried in reply.

“Well then, come along.”

She turned and continued her march, though she let go of his arm, trusting him to follow her of his own accord. When they arrived

at the study, they burst in quite without knocking, startling Lydia so much that she let out a little curse.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked, her tone harsh as she looked up at her sister. “You have made me ruin my letter!”

She held up the sheet of parchment, now with a thick and uneven line of ink running across its surface.

“I’m sorry, Lydia, but—”

“I shall have to do it again now, and that’s a piece of parchment entirely wasted! Is it really that unreasonable to expect you to knock? Or at the very least to enter as a polite young lady might, rather than tumbling in like a mischievous child!”

“I really am sorry, Lydia,” Angela said, rushing over to the desk

and looking down at her sister pleadingly. “But I have something of great importance to tell you, and you must know it sooner rather than later so you might put an end to this dreadful situation you’ve got yourself into.”

Lydia looked at her with a deep frown, her eyebrows meeting in the middle and her jaw clenched. “And pray tell what dreadful situation you *think* I have thrown myself into. *Please* do not come in here, questioning me yet again and—”

“Please excuse me, my lady, but—”

“Mr. Lancaster!” Lydia jumped again when he spoke, his presence a surprise, for she had not noticed him when Angela bowed into the room. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“Angela and I were taking a picnic and—”

“Taking a picnic! And on first name terms, too!” She turned back to Angela, eyes aghast and mouth hanging open. “What is the meaning of this? I hope you did not go alone.”

“Of course I did not,” Angela said, a note of exasperation in her voice, though she knew this was a conversation she would have to have with her sister. “Megan chaperoned. And I will tell you everything as soon as—”

“You will tell me everything right this minute. I cannot have you storming into places—”

“Lydia!” Angela cried. “For goodness’ sake! Will you listen to me for just a minute? We would not have barged in here if we did not have something of the utmost importance to tell you. I will explain everything to you later, but for now you *must* listen.”

Lydia fell back down into her chair and huffed. “Fine,” she said firmly. “Say whatever it is you need to say. Then you and I will be having a long talk.”

Finally, Edward moved from the doorway and came to stand at Angela’s side. She looked up at him gratefully, feeling the support of his being there. Then she turned back to Lydia.

“This might be difficult to hear, but it’s important.”

“Go on,” Lydia replied, tight-lipped and narrow-eyed.

“As you know, Ed—Mr. Lancaster lives at Nordshire Manor, along with the Earl and Lord Brighton.”

“And last weekend,” Edward said, taking over the story for Angela, “we had a dinner in celebration of your engagement, unofficial though it may be as of yet.”

Angela watched as her sister shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and she knew this was only going to get worse. But it had to be done.

“It was a small dinner, by all accounts,” Angela said. “But it appears that Lord Brighton had a word or two to say about you.”

“A rather . . .” Edward paused, frowning as he looked out of the window, trying to find words that were not too harsh and yet properly demonstrated the severity of Lord Brighton’s viewpoint. “A rather harsh word or two.”

“And that’s putting it lightly,” Angela continued, “from what Ed—Mr. Lancaster has told me.”

“Such as?” Lydia demanded, looking from one of them to the other.

Angela took a deep breath. “Such as the fact that he is pleased that scarring is not hereditary, for at least you will have beautiful children.”

Lydia inhaled sharply, her back straightening. “Though perhaps not complimentary,” she said, “what he has said is not untrue. And I am pleased to hear Lord Brighton is thinking of our future family.”

Angela let out a growl of frustration. “Can you not see that he was not saying it out of kindness? Can you not see that he—”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, my lady,” Edward said. “But you must know that is the least offensive of all the things he said.” He glanced

worriedly at Angela before turning back to Lydia. “I have not told your sister the worst of it, for fear of damaging her sensibilities, but —”

“I’m glad, at least,” Lydia snapped, “that you care *something* about my sister’s reputation and sensitivity.”

“I do know that this so-called *Lord* Brighton spoke of you like of some prized pig,” Angela bit. “And that he is nothing if not disrespectful to you, his future wife!”

“She is correct, my lady,” Edward said, his manner calm against the storm that raged in Angela. “He spoke of marital matters that should only be discussed between man and wife, and he then went on to discuss the possibilities of, shall we say, *extra-marital* matters.”

Lydia pushed her chair back, the legs dragging noisily across the

floor. She glared at each of them in turn, breathing heavily. “Did it ever occur to either one of you to take my feelings into account on this matter, and to respect my decision that I made with no coercion from anyone? Or are you just content to believe what you wish to see,” Lydia said in a low angry tone. Neither Angela nor Edward responded to her statement. She stood from her chair and continued to glare at them both. Angela tensed, waiting for the wrath that was surely to come, but Lydia said nothing more.

After a moment that felt to Angela like forever, Lydia turned and stormed out of her own study, leaving Angela and Edward quite alone.

Angela felt a heady mixture of anger and sadness and fear roiling around her stomach and punching at her heart. She could barely breathe, and she couldn’t even look at Edward.

“Angela,” he said softly, turning to her and putting a gentle hand on her elbow.

“No,” she cried, snatching her arm away and taking a step back.

“Don’t touch me!”

She knew none of this was his fault, not truly, and yet her heart screamed at her to get away from him, to put this all on him and hide away. He was part of the same family, after all, wasn’t he? And perhaps he would soon show his true colors, too. But she was also mad at the fact that her sister would choose a life of misery instead pursuing a love which she rightfully deserved. She could not comprehend why all this was happening.

She wished she’d never had the misfortune of having her own family meet the Lancaster family, for Lydia’s sake. She needed space to process the situation. She needed time away from Edward.

“I . . . I’m sorry,” he said, blinking rapidly, his voice heavy with evident panic and concern. “I did not mean to—”

“Just go, Edward. Please. I need to be alone,” she said quietly as she turned away from him.

Chapter 20

Four days had passed since Angela sent Edward away, and for four days, Edward had been in agony. He missed her dearly. He even missed the bright and hopeful thoughts he had of her, for now every thought was tainted by the pain he felt when she screamed at him and demanded he leave.

That afternoon, he'd returned home feeling deflated and lost, unsure where to go from there. He understood she was angry and upset, and most definitely worried about her sister, but he had never seen Angela rage like that before.

After a few hours of consternation and concern, he finally went to his desk and wrote her a long letter. In it, he professed his love to her. He told her how beautiful and kind she was, how sweet and full of goodness.

He declared his intentions, explaining how he wished to tell the world of their friendship in the hopes it would grow into something more. He told her he loved her and how he hoped their courtship would lead to marriage.

When he finished, he didn't read it back for fear he would want to change things, lessen his passion perhaps out of insecurity or worry. He wanted her to see his raw emotion on the page, even if that very thing was frightening in itself. He folded it up as soon as the ink was dry, sealed it, and sent it off with the footman.

Then came the wait, and he had not heard from her since. He hoped and prayed that she was all right, and that his letter had not made things worse. He'd considered calling on her, he'd wanted to write to her again, but he ultimately decided against both things. He knew he had to give her time.

That was why, when the butler entered with a letter for him,

Edward leapt from his couch, his heart already singing with joy. She'd finally replied to him!

“A letter for you, sir,” the butler said.

“When did it arrive?” Edward asked, barely able to keep the squeak of happiness from his voice.

“Why, not more than five minutes ago, sir.”

“And who is it from?” Edward asked, knowing—hoping—it was from Angela and enjoying the sweet anticipation that he brought on by teasing himself in this way.

The butler looked at him curiously. “It bears the crest of the Dorsets, sir,” he said. “And it has the faint scent of lavender.”

It is her!

He waited for the butler to leave before he scurried back to the couch, clutching onto the letter as if it was his lifeline. He slipped his finger beneath the seal but, just as he was about to snap it open, a fear descended upon him.

What if she does not respond kindly?

Edward had poured his heart out in his own letter, telling her how much he cared and showing his true self, the one he kept hidden from the rest of the world. And from their friendship, he would assume she felt the same.

But now, there was that seed of doubt, taking root in the pit of his stomach and growing faster than Edward could fight back against

it. She had been so very angry—incredibly so.

He lowered the letter into his lap, closed his eyes, and took a few calming deep breaths. It was something his father had taught him to do, all those years ago, whenever Edward faced something scary. When he'd finally calmed his racing heart, he opened the letter and read it slowly.

Edward,

I must put distance between us. My love for my sister compels me to reevaluate how the Lancaster family may treat her since she is so set on marrying your cousin. My own feelings for you have caused me to question if I am making the right choice in giving my heart to you. What kind of man could you possibly be under your gentlemanly facade? Are you just like your cousin but better at hiding your true colors? I do not know what to believe anymore. Therefore, I wish to have nothing more to do with you. Please do not contact me again.

Lady Angela Stanley

It was short and to the point. Blunt, almost, though sharp enough to stab him through his heart. He let out a cry of pain and anguish, his chest hurting, and he let the missive fall to the floor.

He wanted to screw it up and throw it in the fire, but he didn't dare. He knew he would, later on, want to torture himself by reading those words over and over. Instead, he left it where it was and got up, wandering over to the window.

James had been such a blight on his life, someone he had to fight against at every moment, and yet at the same time, someone he had to defend. And now, this was the worst of his infractions. Edward had been tarred with the same brush, James' reputation damaging his own and ruining his chances at love.

Edward left his room, wanting to slam the door in anger and frustration, but refraining from it. Instead, he trotted down the stairs, heading straight for the drawing room and hoping no one else was in there.

He was in luck—his uncle was away on business and James, he was certain, would be out causing trouble somewhere. The room was warm thanks to the gently flickering fire, and it was filled with a bright sunlight that seemed to mock Edward's pain.

He went straight to the brandy—something Edward so rarely did—and poured himself a drink. It disappeared in a single gulp, the heat of it burning his gullet in a way that seared at his emotional pain, disguising it.

He sighed in satisfaction and poured himself another, before wandering once again to the window. He looked out upon the world.

Though autumn rapidly approached, the garden was still in full bloom, and Edward began to think of the cyclical nature of things.

The trees did not mind when their leaves turned from green to orange to brown, nor did they care when they shed them for winter. The flowers, though it seemed as though they died, did not—they would rise again in spring. Whenever something was lost, it would come back around again.

Just as happiness will, he thought, the idea settling the hurt in him.

He nodded to himself, and then sat on the chair next to the fire, watching the low flames dance in the grate. Angela's letter had hurt him; he could not deny that fact. But, he realized, he was not heartbroken. He would have been, if he thought it a true reflection of her feelings, but he knew it was not.

Deep down, beneath his pain and beneath his initial reaction, Edward knew that Angela still had feelings for him, even if she did not outright love him as he did her. Her letter was more a reflection of her feelings over the James and Lydia situation.

She was hurt and upset, angry even, and Edward could understand that. She had always been protective of her older sister since the carriage accident and wanted what was best for her, even if there was disagreement between the two sisters. She was lashing out at an easy target, and if she needed to do that in order to find herself in a better place, Edward was willing to take that lashing. He would do anything to make her feel better, even if that meant he was banished from her life for the time being.

He took a sip of his brandy, feeling the positivity rise within him once more. She would come back to him; he was certain of it. She just needed time and space. He would give her a few days to process everything, to cool her hot temper, and he would approach her again.

Edward let his head rest against the back of the chair, his eyes to the ceiling, and he took in another deep breath. He felt better now, easier within himself.

“Drinking in the afternoon! I never thought I’d see the golden boy doing such a thing.”

Edward turned at the sound of James’ voice and could not keep the scowl from his face. James marched into the room and straight to the brandy, the glass clinking as the decanter fell against the rim.

“Want a top up?” James asked brightly.

“No, I do not.”

“So, what’s got into you?” James asked. He turned and leaned against the drinks cabinet, raising his glass in the air as if in toast.

“Nothing,” Edward replied, tight-lipped.

He looked away, hating the gloating expression that seemed to have taken up permanent residence on James’ face. Of course, James knew nothing of Edward’s relationship with Angela, but he still couldn’t help feeling as though James was triumphing in his misery.

James sighed and walked over to the chair opposite Edward, allowing himself to flop into it. “I don’t know why I’m asking really,” he said. “It’s not like I care.”

Edward let out a humorless laugh. “You get more kindly and sincere every day, cousin.”

“Don’t I just?” James chuckled. He held his glass up again. “For me, I’m celebrating the fact that Humphrey is finally out of my life for

good.”

“What do you mean?” Edward asked. He sat up a little straighter, his interest now piqued, and he narrowed his eyes at his cousin.

“What have you done?”

“Tut tut, Edward. Why do you always assume it’s something *I’ve* done?”

“Because it usually is,” Edward replied.

James laughed. “All right, I’ll give you that one. But this time, Humphrey has done it all himself. He’s going back to sea! Running away from everything. Isn’t that just the most amusing, glorious thing you have ever heard?”

Edward paused, yet again outraged by James’ audacity, though

he knew he should be used to it by now. “Is all this a game to you?” he asked. “Are you simply playing with people’s emotions—their lives—for your own amusement?”

James snorted with laughter. “Why, yes,” he said. “I suppose you could say it’s a game. And isn’t it a fun one?”

Edward jumped up from his seat, all his anger driving him forward, and he yelled at his cousin.

“You disgust me more and more each day. When will you learn to be a decent man like your father?”

James leapt up, too, and he stood barely inches from Edward’s face, his breath hot and rancid with cigar smoke.

“Except, dear cousin, *I* am winning. I am far more disgusted by

your pathetic attempts at nobility when you will always be nothing . .
. a nobody. You shouldn't even be in this house."

"It isn't I who is in the wrong place," Edward snarled. "You have brought nothing but shame on this household, and to make matters worse, you are proud of that fact! Some earl you will make."

James let out a callous, cruel laugh. "Ah yes, my friends must be right. You covet my title and my inheritance, don't you? That's what this is all about. Well, you can't have it, Edward. I've won."

"You piece of—"

"What on earth is going on here?"

Aunt Eugenia barged into the room and marched up to the men, pushing her way between them.

“Oh, Mother,” James said, affecting a pained tone. “Edward is being quite the bully.”

Aunt Eugenia turned her glaring eyes upon Edward, and he took a step backwards, his eyes wide in disbelief. He was being no such thing, but he knew his aunt would never believe that.

“You have always been a bane on this family,” Aunt Eugenia growled. “I’ve told that idiot of a husband time and again to get rid of you, but if he is too weak and pathetic to do it, then I suppose I must.”

“You have no right—”

“I want you out of this house, Edward Lancaster, immediately!”

Edward stared at her then flicked his eyes over to James. His cousin hovered over his aunt's shoulder, his expression smug and his eyes shining with delight. How Edward wanted to scream and cry out at the injustice of it all, at how wrong they'd taken him.

But he couldn't, and he knew he couldn't. He bowed stiffly to the Countess and glared at James instead.

"The feeling is quite mutual," he said coldly. "I can assure you of that."

He spun on his heels and walked calmly out of the room, but as soon as he was out of their sight, he positively ran to the garden, desperate for a gulp of fresh air.

He went around to the back of the house, to where he knew there was a small copse, and he hid beneath the shade of the trees,

knowing he was unlikely to be found there. It was where he always went whenever he needed space.

He thought briefly of Humphrey, disappearing on the sea again, and he wished he could leave for good, just like that. He wished he could disappear and never return. But, of course, he couldn't. He would have to return that night.

He couldn't leave his uncle, not after he had been a second father to him for all these years. He would be by Mason's side no matter what.

And then there was Angela. He couldn't, wouldn't, leave her. Not until he was one hundred percent certain that she wanted him to.

Chapter 21

Angela knocked gently on Lydia's door. It had been four days since the disaster in the study, and the sisters had barely spoken to one another. Angela had been furious, but so had Lydia, and Angela knew she needed to give her time.

"Lydia?" she asked, her voice soft as she poked her head around the door.

"What is it?" Lydia asked, not looking up from her papers.

"I was hoping you'd be ready to talk now," Angela said, stepping lightly into the room and closing the door behind her with an audible click. "I haven't been able to sleep or eat, knowing how I have upset you."

Lydia sighed and put her quill down, then looked up at her sister. Angela could see how tired she was, her eyes heavy with dark circles. “I must admit, I do not like the fact that we have argued either. Ask Mrs. Beaumont to fetch us some tea. We’ll talk in the parlor.”

Angela’s heart leapt with hope. She nodded eagerly and scampered out of the room to do as her sister had asked. This was her chance to put things right. She did not want Lydia to marry Lord Brighton, but she would accept her sister’s decision if that meant she could be friends with her sister again.

And besides, she couldn’t very well get to the truth of why Lydia chose this marriage proposal if they did not have kind words to say to one another. They were sisters. They couldn’t allow anything to break up their relationship. On the day their parents died, Angela had promised herself she would always be by Lydia’s side, and she would not let Lord Brighton put a stop to that.

Angela settled herself at the table as Mrs. Beaumont fussed around her, placing the teacups and teapot just so and checking Angela was well.

“It’s been awful, you know,” Mrs. Beaumont said, her emotions written all over her face. “Having you and Lady Lydia in such a quandary. None of us have known what to do or say to put it right.”

Angela smiled kindly at her. “I’m sorry if we have made the air in the house a little uncomfortable,” she said with true feeling. “But I am hoping that today shall be the end of that.”

Mrs. Beaumont nodded and smiled weakly. “Good luck, my lady. I am sure you both will resolve things soon, even if we do not like her choice of suitor.”

In some ways, Mrs. Beaumont had been a surrogate mother to

them, at those times when Lydia was busy running the estate. She'd cared for them as she would for her own children, and Angela deeply appreciated the worry she felt.

She, too, did not want to see Lydia married to Lord Brighton, that much was obvious, and though the housekeeper sometimes spoke out of turn or poked her nose into business that was not hers, Angela knew she did it only out of love.

Lydia finally came into the room and settled herself opposite Angela, smiling at her.

"I am sorry we have not had a chance to speak sooner," she said. "I cannot deny that I have let my own emotions override my actions, and I have avoided you for fear of becoming angry again."

"No," Angela said, reaching over the table and taking her sister's

hand. “I am sorry, dearest Lydia. I was interfering, and I understand why you reacted as you did. I do not have the right to question your decisions.”

“But you do have the right to advise me, dear sister,” Lydia said. “And you certainly have the right to your opinion. I overreacted, and I am dreadfully sorry. The past few days have been just horrid, not having you by my side.”

“Oh, Lydia,” Angela cried. “They’ve been horrible for me as well! I have missed you so very much. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?”

“Only if you can find it in *your* heart to forgive *me*.”

“Then it’s settled,” Angela said, sitting back and smiling warmly. “We are once again friends.”

“And I believe that we have much to talk about. You had a picnic with Mr. Lancaster?” She raised an inquisitive eyebrow at Angela, a smile upon her lips, but Angela frowned and shook her head.

“I don’t wish to talk about him.”

Lydia sighed. “I did not know you were in the habit of keeping secrets from me.”

“Let me pour the tea,” the housekeeper said from across the room.

Mrs. Beaumont jumped towards the table and picked up the teapot, first pouring Lydia a cup, then Angela. Her interruption had been carefully timed, and Angela was grateful for it. It gave her a moment to think.

She didn't want to talk about Edward—not then. She had written to him and told him how she felt, asking him to never contact her again. Although she harbored strong feelings for him, she knew their marriage could never be. He was a Lancaster, after all, and she had no desire to discover he was just like his cousin, albeit better at hiding it.

And yet, she knew she owed it to Lydia to tell her everything. And so, she began to talk. She told her everything, from the moment he soaked her in the street to the moment she sent the letter that morning.

“It seems to me that you have a real connection,” Lydia said, taking a sip of her tea. “But there are some things I don't understand. Firstly, why didn't you tell me any of this? Are we not close enough to share such things? I always thought we were, but perhaps . . .”

“We *are*,” Angela insisted. “Heavens, Lydia, you are my best

friend and greatest confidante in all the world, and I never want that to change.”

“Then why would you keep such a secret from me?”

Angela could hear the hurt in her sister’s voice. “It was not meant to be a secret, not really,” she said. “But you’ve been going through so much. All through the spring and summer, there were various suitors, then there was Humphrey, and then Lord Brighton. It felt somehow wrong to tell you how happy I was when you were struggling so.”

Lydia shook her head and chuckled. “Angela, dear, I will be there for you no matter what is happening in my own life, and I will be happy for you, even if I am not happy for myself. And I have not been unhappy, no matter what you think.”

“But you have, Lydia,” Angela insisted. “You cannot see it because you are too close to it, but you *have* been unhappy. Love is within your grasp and you are throwing it away because of some arrangement no one else can understand.”

“And you are denying yourself love, from what I hear,” Lydia said. “That is the second thing I do not understand. Why have you written to Mr. Lancaster and told him you no longer wish to see him?”

Angela closed her eyes. She’d hoped her sister wouldn’t ask that question, because she couldn’t truly answer it herself. She had her reasons, but she couldn’t quite put them into words. They were feelings more than anything else. Fear, worry, anger, sadness.

“If knowing Lord Brighton has taught me anything, it is that he comes from a disreputable and ignoble family.”

“But knowing Mr. Lancaster, you have seen nothing of the sort from him.”

“He is associated with Lord Brighton, and that is enough for me.”

Angela scowled at the thought and turned to look out of the window as their conversation settled into silence. She could feel her sister’s eyes upon her, but she didn’t look back. She couldn’t. She might break down if she did.

“You deserve all the happiness in the world, Angela,” Lydia said softly after a long moment. “I believe you are denying yourself that because you believe in something that is not true. Give yourself a chance at love, at least. It’s what you said you wanted, wasn’t it? A true love match, like that of Maria and Andy?”

Yes, it is.

Angela shook her head and turned back to Lydia, deciding not to allow the conversation to continue in this vein. She would not let her sister talk her out of a decision she had already made. Any possible courtship between her and Edward must be forgotten.

“What of you?” she asked hesitantly. “You have given up on potential love in favor of a man who has been nothing but unpleasant about you behind your back.”

“I have given up on nothing,” Lydia explained, her tone calm. “And I cannot speak of that which I did not hear directly from Lord Brighton’s mouth myself. He has been nothing but polite to me.”

“Polite!” Angela scoffed. “He is a master of feigning politeness. Even if he had not acted so disgracefully in the company of others, I’m not entirely sure *politeness* is worthy of marriage.”

“Perhaps not,” Lydia replied. “But as you know, this is a marriage of convenience, not of love. It holds many opportunities.”

“Lydia, he talked of taking a mistress as soon as possible, and much worse things too! Edward would not tell me all, so I know they must be frightfully bad. Do these things not bother you?”

Lydia fell silent. She picked up her spoon and stirred her already-stirred tea, the metal clinking against the cup on every turn. Angela breathed heavily, but remained silent as she watched, hoping her sister would finally accept what she was saying. But when Lydia spoke again, she did not raise her head, and it was with a determination that frightened Angela.

“I know that I am ugly, and I always will be. My beauty has long since been shrouded by something I cannot change. I have lived with being whispered about for years now, and I know that will never stop.

Their pitying eyes and rude stares at a disfigured woman will never stop. I've taught myself not to care. And . . . even if Lord Somerset had somehow confessed to being in love with me, he deserves to live his life free from that burden. But I couldn't bear it if I confessed to him and he rejected me. A heart can never be broken if love is not pursued, I guessed."

"But you should care, and you are not ugly," Angela urged. "It's not right, Lydia, and it's certainly not fair. How can you possibly bear it?"

Lydia sighed and finally looked up, holding Angela's gaze steady. "This marriage has to happen, whether you approve of it or not. Love, emotion, kindness—none of that matters in this case."

"You don't have to—"

“I’m glad we’ve made friends,” Lydia said as she rose from her seat. Angela looked up at her with wide, pleading eyes. “But we cannot talk about this any longer. My decision is final.”

Chapter 22

The following day, Edward decided to get out of the house. He couldn't stand the atmosphere in there, so thick with a cold hatred, and he looked forward to his uncle's return in a few days. He would, at the very least, put a stop to Eugenia's sniping and nasty words.

He found himself wandering through the village. It was another bright day, but the air bit with a cold that spoke of the changing seasons, and Edward wore his cloak as he strode through the streets.

It was busy, as it so often was in the mornings, with shoppers and traders alike. Edward liked the bustle of the village square, as it always helped to make him feel anonymous, free from the intense gaze of others.

He didn't understand how, in a single family, there could be such

extremes. The Earl of Nordshire was an exemplary man, fair minded and kindhearted—all the things that he himself aspired to be. And then there were Eugenia and James, hateful and bitter and nothing but unscrupulous in their behavior.

What am I to do?

He desperately looked forward to seeing Angela again, though he knew it was not yet time. He would know in his heart when to go, if she did not contact him before that.

“Excuse me.”

Edward turned at the voice and smiled broadly. “Lord Somerset! What a pleasant surprise.”

“Mr. Lancaster, how do you do?”

Humphrey smiled, though Edward was unconvinced by it. He looked weighed down, both physically and emotionally. His hands were laden with bags of goods, but his eyes were heavy with sadness. Edward wondered if he looked similarly burdened to Humphrey, whether his own eyes gave away his feelings.

“I’m well, thank you,” he said. “You’ve been shopping, I see.”

Humphrey looked down at the bags as though surprised to find them in his hands. “Oh, yes,” he said, looking back up with a weak smile. “Supplies. For my trip. I’m assuming you know by now that I am going traveling again? Everyone else seems to know.”

“I had heard, yes,” Edward replied, thinking back to the gloating way in which James had told him. “Say, would you care for a glass of ale? There’s a tavern just around the corner and—”

“I’d love to,” Humphrey replied, perhaps more quickly than was necessary.

The pair said nothing as they made their way to the tavern, nor while the tavern keeper poured the ales, nor as they settled themselves at a small table in the far corner.

The tavern was noisy and thick with smoke, but Edward liked it. It meant they could fade into the background and talk without fear of being overheard.

“Lord—”

“Humphrey, please,” Humphrey said. He scoffed and shook his head. “We’ve known each other for far too long for formalities, don’t you think?”

Edward was surprised. It was true that he and Humphrey had known each other for almost as long as Humphrey had known James, but there had always been a distance between them, a barrier of sorts. He'd always assumed that, since James didn't like him, Humphrey would not either.

Perhaps this newfound amiability was thanks to the break in Humphrey's friendship with James, but Edward didn't really mind what caused it. He was sorry for the way his cousin had treated him.

"Humphrey," he said with a grateful smile. "I'm glad you came to have a drink with me. I've been wanting to talk to you and apologize deeply for James' actions. He has behaved appallingly and, quite frankly, it does not look as though he intends to stop such behavior any time soon."

Humphrey took a sip of his ale while waving his hand in the air,

dismissing Edward's words.

"You, of all people, have nothing to apologize for, Edward," he said. "You have always been a commendable man, and I think that's partly what irks James so much about you." He chuckled, though without humor, and Edward nodded.

"There are lots of things about me that irk James, not least that his father often seems to favor me. Though you understand it's not that he *actually* favors me, don't you? It's that he disapproves of James' actions."

"I understand perfectly," Humphrey said. "I have seen it often enough."

"I appreciate you saying that, but I am truly, genuinely sorry for his latest devilries," Edward said.

Humphrey snorted and took another sip of his ale. "One cannot blame a fellow for his family. You did not choose the situation you are now in. Whereas I, on the other hand, did."

"What do you mean?" Edward asked, intrigued by Humphrey's words.

"I befriended him, didn't I? I suppose I got what I deserved."

"No one deserves to be treated badly, and especially not for simply being friends with someone," Edward replied.

"He wasn't always bad, you know?" Humphrey continued. "When we were children, he was a little mischievous, but no more than boys that age normally are. But his actions got worse, his words and thoughts more extreme as the years went on. It was such a

gradual process that it was difficult to notice until it was too late.”

“I suspect his father feels the same in that respect,” Edward agreed.

He finally lifted his ale to his lips and drank deeply. It was warm, but it was rich and earthy, the flavors grounded and full. He liked Humphrey, he always had, and sitting here with him gave Edward a sense of renewed calm, of a new energy.

Humphrey laughed. “I should have made friends with *you* all those years ago, not James,” he said. “Perhaps we would have made a better pair.”

Edward smiled kindly at him. “It’s never too late to make friends, Humphrey.”

Humphrey nodded and Edward could see he was pleased by that thought. He raised his glass in the air in a toast. “To new friends, then.”

Edward copied his actions. “And to removing those who are not worthy of our time.”

They both drank deeply, reflecting on that thought and pleased they’d come together.

“So,” Edward started once he’d put his glass carefully back down on the tabletop. “Where will you go on your travels? From what I hear, you’ve already been everywhere there is to go.”

Humphrey chuckled. “It’s true, I have already done an awful lot of traveling, but I adore it. The world is such a wondrous place. But honestly, I don’t know where I’m going to go. I just know I have to get

away from England. Where, it doesn't matter, as long as it happens."

"It's really that bad?" Edward asked, wincing at Humphrey's evident pain.

Humphrey looked away and licked his lips, but he nodded. "I cannot stand to be here and see Lydia married to someone else, least of all to James."

Edward looked down at the murky ale in his glass and let his mind wander. He could perfectly understand what Humphrey was saying. The very thought of Angela marrying another man—any man—was torturous. It didn't matter who it was or whether they truly loved each other; Edward would not be able to watch it.

And that was thought alone. Actually being in that situation would be too much to bear. He didn't blame Humphrey for

wanting to leave, even if it did seem to others that he was running away.

With a sigh, Humphrey said, "So I leave in a few days."

"So soon," Edward replied, though in truth he was not surprised to hear it. Wouldn't he want to get away as fast as possible, if it were him? "Have you told Lady Lydia?"

Humphrey frowned and swallowed, but he shook his head. "No," he said. "I thought it best not to involve her any further."

"But you must!" Edward cried, the words rushing out of his mouth before he had a chance to tame them.

Humphrey's face broke into a pained expression. "I can't."

“Humphrey, forgive me if I am speaking out of turn, but in the spirit of our newfound friendship, I must tell you that you absolutely cannot leave without saying goodbye to her. She will never forgive you, and worse, you will never forgive yourself!”

“But I *can't*,” Humphrey said again, his tone insistent.

“Humphrey, if you cannot do it for yourself, do it for her. Give her the opportunity to see your true feelings.”

Humphrey stared down at the table for a few moments, looking defeated. But then he looked up and smiled. “Edward Lancaster, I do believe you’re right.”

Chapter 23

“What a dreary, miserable day,” Angela said as she settled herself onto the couch.

Through the window, she could barely see a foot ahead thanks to the heavy rain and the thick dark clouds that were low in the sky. She curled her feet beneath her and pulled over the knitted blanket that normally stayed draped across the back of the couch.

The parlor was warm, the fire crackling in the grate, and Lydia sat at the table, staring out at the sodden garden. Angela could see that her thoughts were as heavy as the weather, and that she sat there with brewing emotions. She didn't say anything, instead allowing her sister to feel and to think in peace. She waved William over. He was back at home for the school holidays, and Angela was so happy to have him there.

“Do you remember this?” she asked, holding up a well-worn leather-bound book.

“Is that the book of poems Mother used to read to us?” William asked, his eyes lighting up as they had so often when they were young children.

“The very one,” Angela said. “I was digging around in the library this morning when I came across it. *The Pretty Little Pocket Book.*”

In truth, she’d been looking for anything that would take her mind off Edward. It had been a rational, thought-out decision to end their courtship, but it seemed that her heart would not listen to her head, no matter how much she insisted.

It had been almost nine days since she wrote him the letter and she had heard nothing from him. It saddened her, but she supposed

that he had followed her words to the letter and kept his distance. She wanted to hate him, to rail and shout at him for not attempting contact. But she couldn't, and it would be unfair of her to do so. In her heart, she knew he was nothing like Lord Brighton.

In her heart, he was still *her* Edward, the man she dreamed of one day becoming her husband. And so, she'd sent herself off to the library that morning with the task of finding something to take her mind off him. She had found it—this little book her mother had read to them so often.

She held the book up in the air again. "Shall we read some?" she asked.

William nodded eagerly and then joined her on the couch, slipping under the blanket and curling into her, much as he used to do with their mother. She opened the book randomly and began to read.

Just as her mother had, she put in the dramatic inflections and comical voices where appropriate, and it wasn't long before she and William were giggling.

Angela glanced over at Lydia. She still stared out of the window, feigning disinterest, but Angela could see that the lines on her forehead had softened a little. She was listening, Angela was certain, even if part of her mind remained elsewhere.

Like mine.

She shook that thought away, refusing to let Edward interrupt this precious moment she shared with her siblings. It had been far too long since the three of them had just relaxed and enjoyed each other's company with no motives or tasks or worries.

“Oh!” she declared with a laugh as she turned the brittle, crackly

page—a stark reminder of how long ago their childhoods were. “I remember this one. Mother loved it.”

She smiled down at the illustrations, lost in the memory, when William’s voice brought her back to the present.

“Read it then,” he urged, impatient to hear more.

Angela laughed—William would always be the eager one, the one pushing for more and more.

“All right, listen,” she said then grinned at him before carefully pronouncing each word. “This lesson observe, When you play at cricket...”

She caught William’s eye and he readily joined in, the words seared in their memory.

“Catch *all* fairly out, Or bowl down the wicket!”

They collapsed into giggles, not so much for the poem itself but for the nostalgia it brought with it. Angela glanced over at Lydia and while she was still staring out of the window, even she was chuckling quietly to herself. Angela was glad to see it. Their childhood had been so sweet, but those simpler times felt like a different lifetime.

She looked back down at the book, though she had no need to. These poems were so familiar to each of them that they knew which verse would come next, almost as if they belonged together.

“This Maxim regard, Now you’re in your prime; Look ere ‘tis too late; By the Fore-lock take *time*.”

Angela snatched another glance at Lydia, hoping that the words

of the poem had got to her in the same way they had got to Angela herself. From the flickering frown in Lydia's reflection, Angela guessed they had.

She turned the page and went to read the next poem, but before she could, Lydia turned to them with a warm, nostalgic smile on her face.

"Do you remember how Father used to sing?" she said with a chuckle. "He insisted he was good enough to be in the opera, but I'm surprised our ears didn't break with the screech!"

Angela wanted to clap her hands with joy at seeing her sister's renewed spirits. "He wasn't *that* bad," she said, wanting to defend her father but unable to stop herself from laughing at the same time.

"Yes, he was," William laughed. "It was truly terrible."

He pulled away from Angela and sat up straight, his eyes as bright as Lydia's as they took this journey into the past. Angela looked at them both and felt her heart swell with love and pride for the people they'd become, and for what they had achieved since that fateful day when their parents were killed.

William's laughter died away, and he looked pained for a moment. "But I'd give anything to hear it again," he said. "Even if it was just one more time."

As would I.

Angela cleared her throat. Thinking of her parents was always so bittersweet. How desperately she missed them.

"He used to sing while Mother taught us to dance," Lydia said

wistfully. “Do you remember?”

“She was such a wonderful dancer,” William said. “If I am lucky enough to find love when I am older, I shall think of Mother as I twirl my bride around the ballroom floor.”

“*If?*” Angela asked, surprised at her brother’s reticence. “I can see so much love in your future, William. Any lady will be lucky to have you.”

Without warning, an image of Edward flashed in her mind, and Angela briefly closed her eyes, pushing him away. Why couldn’t she just forget about him, now that she had decided she wouldn’t be with him?

“We are lucky to have you, William,” Lydia added. “In fact, I feel incredibly lucky to have both of you.”

“Me too,” Angela said, pleased to be brought back to the room.

“And I,” William said, smiling broadly at his two sisters. “I love you both dearly.”

“And we shall always have each other, no matter what happens next,” Lydia said.

“A family like no other.”

Lydia got up and began to approach them, but before they could all embrace, the bell rang and they all turned towards the door, curious about who could be visiting at such an hour—and in such awful weather.

Edward?

Angela's heart leapt at the possibility, but she quickly shot it down. She didn't want to get her hopes up, and she told herself quite firmly that she did not even *want* him to visit. Beaumont entered the room and Angela held her breath.

Her hopes were dashed—it was not Edward—but Angela couldn't deny that she was pleased by who the visitor turned out to be, all the same.

“Lord Somerset is here to see you, Lady Lydia,” the butler announced.

Angela shot a glance at Lydia, but her sister did not respond. She didn't even notice, instead blinking in dumb surprise. Angela wanted to shake her, to tell her this was her moment to reveal her true

feelings, to fix everything. But she knew she could not lean of false hope.

When Humphrey finally entered the room, he positively dripped, the water running from his hair and his nose and the tips of his fingers. Angela stifled a giggle—he looked rather silly, and she thought it served him right for being out on such a terrible day.

“Oh my goodness, Humphrey!” Lydia cried, dragging him closer to the fire. “You are positively soaked.”

“It’s raining,” he said dryly, and Angela laughed again. As if they hadn’t noticed!

“Angela, fetch a towel,” Lydia commanded. “William, stoke the fire.”

Angela hesitated, staring in bemused fascination, hoping and praying he had come all this way and in such weather to declare his love. But then she dashed out of the room, practically skidding in the entrance hall, and she ran to the room where she knew the maids kept the towels and bed linen.

She whipped one down from the shelf and ran back to the parlor, not wanting to be away for a second more than was strictly necessary. She wanted to hear what Humphrey had to say for himself—and she wanted to make sure that Lydia did not miss her chance and turn him away.

Humphrey said nothing when he took the towel from Angela and began rubbing at the hair on his head and over his face. Lydia said nothing either, but Angela could see that she couldn't take her gaze off the man. Her eyes were large and full of love, full of pleading and beseeching.

I only hope Humphrey can see it too.

“Thank you,” he said eventually, handing the now-sodden towel back to Angela.

“You’re welcome,” she muttered in reply, then looked down at it with a hint of disgust. It was warm and damp, and she quickly handed it to a maid who scuttled off with it.

“Would you mind awfully if I speak to your sister alone?”

Angela and William both hesitated, shooting each other looks. She had so many questions—whether Lydia could be trusted on her own, what Humphrey would say to her, and whether Lydia even wanted to be left alone with him.

But her sister nodded, and Angela took that to mean she would

be all right, that Angela and William were to leave the room. She suppressed a huff, not liking being dismissed when she'd much rather be privy to what was going on, but she nodded back and took William's hand.

“Come on, we'll go play cards in the drawing room,” she said.

But as soon as they were out of the door, William hissed at her.

“Cards! We're not really doing that, are we?”

“Of course not,” she hissed back. “We're going into the next room to listen in!”

There was a small hole in the wall between the two rooms.

Angela remembered it well from her childhood, when she would sit in on their parents' events and discussions, and she knew for a fact it had never been repaired.

She grinned at William and they took turns to watch. But her smile quickly faded when she heard Humphrey's first words.

"I'm here to say goodbye."

Angela gasped at just the same time that Lydia did. William looked pained, too, and he grabbed hold of Angela's hand and squeezed it as though for courage.

"Goodbye?" Lydia asked in a meek voice.

"Yes," he said simply. Angela pushed her lips together to prevent herself from whimpering—or worse, from calling out.

"But I don't understand. Where are you going? Why?"

“I have to go away, Lydia. I cannot stay here and watch you get married to another man—and James Lancaster, of all men!”

Angela sneered at the mention of that man’s name. She wished he’d never even been born.

“But I don’t understand,” Lydia said. “Where has all this come from?”

“Joe will be here soon.”

“Joe?”

“My friend, the sailor,” Humphrey explained. “I’m sure I’ve told you about him before.”

“You’re going travelling again? You’re leaving England?”

He’s leaving Lydia! Angela glanced at her brother, her eyes darting with panic, but all he could do was shrug in reply.

“I am,” Humphrey said. “Travelling has always been my passion, as you know. Coming back to England in the first place had been difficult.”

“How long will you be gone?” Lydia asked softly.

“A year, possibly two.”

“But . . . but what of the estate? I thought your father called you back because you were needed?”

Forget the estate! Angela wanted to scream at her sister. *Think of yourself!*

“He called me back to take the title. And the estate is all set up now. I have a man who will look after things while I am gone.”

“I see.”

“Lydia,” he said softly.

“Yes?”

“I must tell you something. I must tell you how much I love you.”

Yes! Finally! Angela could not stop herself from jumping up, a wide grin on her face.

“Love me?” Lydia sounded uncertain, disbelieving, and Angela once again wanted to shake her.

“I love you so much it hurts. I have adored you ever since the moment I met you on the dock.”

“Goodness, that’s sweet,” Angela muttered.

“Sickly so,” William teased.

They listened as Humphrey launched into a monologue that set Angela’s heart racing and her knees quaking. He told her how much he adored her wit and charm. He told her how strong of a woman she was and that she should not let her scars rule her life. She was

beautiful to him and worthy of being loved. He felt that they were soulmates. It was such a heartfelt declaration of love that Angela wouldn't have been surprised to see it in a book, a hero promising himself forever.

This is it, Lydia! Tell him how you feel!

Angela herself almost swooned at his words, but as she watched through that small hole, she saw that Lydia had frozen, , an unrecognizable look settled across her face.

“I know of your feelings, Humphrey . . . perhaps under other circumstances we could be together. But you deserve someone better than me.”

Angela and William exchanged looks of shock. *You deserve better as well, Lydia.*

“Well,” he said after a long moment. “I know it is too late, if there ever was a chance, but it was important you knew the truth. I am sorry for wasting your time. I wish you all the health and happiness in the world, my lady.”

“She’s not letting him go, is she?” William asked in a loud whisper, his panic rising.

“Yes,” Angela replied sadly. “I have a horrible feeling that she is.”

Chapter 24

It had been three days since Edward had met Humphrey in the village, and since then he'd thought about the advice he had given. He was still convinced he was right, and he hoped that Humphrey would do as he suggested.

But what had really set Edward thinking was whether that same advice could be applied to his own situation. He had already poured his heart out, albeit by letter, to the woman he loved. She had rejected him then, but perhaps now it was time to approach her again.

Perhaps now, he hoped, she had time to let go of her anger and her hurt. There was even a small part of him that hoped Humphrey had declared his love and all was well in the Dorset household—though he was certain he would have heard if Lydia and James' engagement had been cancelled.

He pondered over it for an hour or so, before deciding that yes, it was a good time to call on Angela. As he collected his tailcoat and top hat from the butler, though, his uncle walked into the entrance hall.

“Edward, there you are! You’ve been hiding in your room all morning; I thought perhaps you’d been taken ill.”

“Uncle Mason! I didn’t realize you were back. I’m sorry; I would have welcomed you home if I had known.”

“Came back this morning,” Mason replied. “A little earlier than scheduled, admittedly, but my business was concluded, and I do like my home comforts. I am just glad I got in before the storm. Do you mind if we have a quiet word, Edward?”

So, he’s already spoken to Aunt Eugenia.

“I was just on my way out, but—”

“It won’t take long. In my study?”

“Of course, Uncle Mason.”

Edward followed the Earl back through the house and into his study, where Mason settled himself behind the desk. Edward sat in front of it, feeling like a schoolboy about to be chastised. He’d always managed to avoid the headmaster’s room at Eton, but he’d been told about it often enough that he could imagine it.

“Your aunt,” Mason began, and Edward struggled not to roll his eyes. This was about the argument, then.

“She is upset with me yet again, I know,” Edward replied.

“What happened?” Mason asked, his voice heavy with the sadness that something had gone wrong yet again. “She wants me to see you on the streets, but you know I won’t do that, not unless you do something truly terrible.”

“I am very sorry to have put you in this situation, Uncle Mason,” Edward said. “I didn’t even know Aunt Eugenia was in the house that day, but apparently she was, and . . .”

“And what?”

“And she overheard James and me arguing. She intervened and, well, she was less than complimentary. I told her the feeling was mutual before walking out. I should have held my tongue, I know it, but I was simply so riled about . . .”

Edward trailed off, realizing he'd already said more than he had intended.

“Riled about what?” Mason asked. “What were you and James arguing about?”

“I’m not sure—”

“The more I know, the easier it will be for me to fix this, Edward,” Mason said, shooting him a serious look.

Edward took a deep breath. His uncle was right.

“After the dinner party, when James and I and the others retired to smoke, I overheard him saying some dreadful things about Lady Lydia.”

“I see,” Mason said. He looked concerned but not overly so. That’s when Edward realized he would have to start at the beginning and tell him everything.

“A few months ago, I met a young lady quite by accident. She was out walking and I was in the coach, and we went through a puddle just as she passed us. She was soaked, the poor thing, and she dropped the box of cakes she had been carrying and well . . .”

He paused, his mouth open but the words not coming.

“I’m confused,” Mason said. “What has this to do with James?”

“That lady turned out to be Lady Lydia’s sister. Lady Angela. She and I have grown close over the season, and we have been unofficially courting, you could say.”

“All right,” Mason said, though the frown on his face told Edward that he still didn’t really get where he was coming from.

“You see, I’ve been witnessing James’ engagement to Lydia Stanley from both sides. James is . . . well, he’s uncouth and disrespectful, cunning, and very often, he is cruel, too. When we were still in London, I saw him cavorting with a common woman. And since we’ve been home, he’s spoken of taking a mistress, and—”

“I do not agree with taking a mistress, Edward, but it’s something that many men do. I’m not convinced I can reprimand James for that. Certainly not yet, anyhow.”

“No,” Edward replied with a frown. “I don’t suppose you could.”

He knew he wasn’t getting his point across very well. James’

behavior was significantly worse than he could put into words, and he was also aware that he was Mason's son. There was only so much he could say. But when he looked up, his uncle was smiling kindly at him.

"You remind me more and more of your father every day," he said. "You know how close I was to my little brother, Edward, and though I miss him dreadfully, I see him every time I look at you."

Edward scoffed. "I wish I was like my father. He was a good man."

"He was," Mason agreed. "As are you. And I suspect this is at least in part where you and James clash. I don't agree with the way my son is, as you well know, but so many men would not see an issue with his attitude."

“That doesn’t make it right,” Edward snapped.

“No, it doesn’t,” Mason said. “But it’s the norm, I’m afraid. And don’t get me wrong, I am not saying you should change your attitude to be more like his. Far from it! But you are noble in the truest sense of the word, even if you have no title, and you are honorable. *You* are a good man, Edward Lancaster. And I believe it is your scruples that make you so angry at James’ words.”

“But he should not—”

“No, he should not,” Mason said, firmer this time. “But you cannot compare him with your own morality. There is no way he can match up to it. I wish he were more like you, but he is not. And though he and Lady Lydia do not love one another, and though he may act callously from time to time, he has offered her a good deal. She will benefit from the marriage as much as he.”

Edward sat back in his seat, looking down at his lap and chewing on his lip. Society may approve of this sham of a marriage, but he wished it were not so. He had to understand that many marriages were built like this and that only a few were able to marry for love. A thought popped into his head and he looked up.

“Did my parents love each other, or was theirs a marriage of arrangement as well?”

Mason chuckled and shook his head. “Arrangement it was most definitely not! They loved each other so very much. I remember my own mother being against the union at first—at least until she got to know your mother. They quickly became the best of friends when your grandmother realized just how happy your mother made your father. There was also the added benefit of financial standing between the two families.”

Edward smiled, thankful they’d experienced such wonder and

managed to keep hold of it for their unfortunately short lives.

“I’m glad of that,” he said.

“They always said they wanted their son brought up to be able to find the same kind of love,” Mason said, eyeing Edward carefully.

Edward shifted in his seat. He’d already said too much about Angela, especially when he couldn’t be absolutely certain she would not turn him away again. His breath caught at that thought. He’d avoided it for days, but now, he could not. There was a fear, smothered beneath his hope, that she did not love him after all, that he had imagined her kind feelings towards him.

“I’m still not entirely sure what has been going on,” Mason continued, catching Edward’s eye again. “I’m not convinced I’ll ever understand, if I’m honest. But what I do know for absolute certain is

that I don't want you to be in the same situation as me—married to a woman you do not like very much, and all because you let the woman you love slip through your fingers. Edward, if you have a chance at happiness, you *must* pursue it.”

Edward stilled, his thoughts running with his uncle's words, letting them soak into his being. It was true! This was his one chance and he had to take it. He had to get his Angela back. But there was one thing stopping him.

“What about—”

“I'll have a word with James and ensure he reins in his behavior, though I cannot do more than that. You cannot concern yourself with that situation anymore. And I will speak to your aunt, too. All will be well, Edward, if only you go after your lady.”

“Thank you, Uncle Mason,” he said with true and genuine sincerity. “Thank you for everything.”

He jumped from his seat, meaning to visit Angela immediately, but as he got to the door, Mason called out.

“Edward, what do you think of James’ bride-to-be?”

Edward looked over his shoulder at his uncle. “Lydia?” he asked. “I pity her for the future she has to face. I would feel sorry for any woman who would attach herself to him.”

Before the Earl could say another word, Edward left the room, cursing his loose lips and praying that things would go better, at least, with Angela.

Chapter 25

“No!” Angela cried before she straightened up and stared at the wall in horror.

“What’s happened?” William said, ducking down to peek through the hole. “What’s going on? Angela?”

“He’s gone,” she said, her jaw wobbling and her eyes darting. “Humphrey’s gone and Lydia is just standing there!”

“I’m not standing for this,” William said, his chest puffed out and his manner blustering as he pushed past Angela and out of the door. Angela followed, a spring to her footsteps as she dashed out of the room and around into the parlor.

“What are you doing?” William shrieked as they entered. “Did you not hear what he said?”

He looked so furious that Lydia took a surprised step back, but she did not reply but for the blinking of her lashes and the vague confused expression on her face. It was clear that she was on the verge of crying.

“Why are you still here?” Angela demanded, her heart racing ten to the dozen. “What is wrong with you?”

“You were listening in,” Lydia said in an accusatory tone.

Angela rolled her eyes. Her sister had said and done some silly things in the past, but this really topped the lot. For an intelligent young lady, she could certainly be dull from time to time.

“Of course we were listening,” Angela snapped. “We had to ensure you did not do something foolish—and yet here you are, doing something immeasurably stupid!”

Her words were harsher than she intended, but if it kicked Lydia into action, it was worth it. As it was, Lydia seemed struck dumb by what was happening to her.

“Go after him, Lydia,” William urged. “He loves you.”

“And you love him.”

Lydia’s head bounced back and forth between her brother and her sister, and Angela yet again wanted to shake her, thinking it might bring her some sense. She growled in frustration.

What is wrong with her?

“For goodness’ sake, Lydia,” William said, his tone as exasperated as Angela felt. “Lord Byron himself could not have said something as romantic as what Humphrey just said to you and now you are turning him away!”

“But—”

Angela took a step forward, not thinking but acting on impulse, on intuition. Her sister did not need them to tell her how foolish she was, nor did she need further proof that Humphrey loved her. What she needed was reassurance, and Angela could give her that, at the very least.

She held onto each of Lydia’s arms and looked deep into her eyes with as much love and understanding as she could give. Lydia looked almost lost, childlike, and Angela knew in that instance that she’d made the right choice.

“Lydia,” she said softly, her voice reminiscent of their mother’s.

“You finally know for yourself that Humphrey truly loves you. He loves you for you and thinks you are beautiful, scars and all. He doesn’t care what people say. You *deserve* this. You are worthy. And so is Humphrey. You love each other, and you are perfect for each other. Please, I beg you, do not let this opportunity go to waste. It is your very last chance at happiness. For once in your life, follow your heart.”

As if snapped out of a trance, Lydia let out a loud gasp and jumped back, a hand flying to her mouth. It was as though realization dawned in that second, and she nodded furiously.

“Believe it,” Angela said again.

“I do,” Lydia said, her voice little more than a whimper. “I finally do.”

“Then go!” William roared, a finger pointing to the door.

Lydia’s smile grew, her cheeks bunching, and then she laughed with pure delight and joy. She ran out of the room, through the entrance hall, out of the front door, and down the steps.

Angela only needed to glance at William to know they were thinking the same thing. They both ran after her, cheering and shouting in encouragement.

“You can do it, Lydia,” Angela cried.

“Stop him, Lydia,” William shouted, both of them laughing with happiness.

They stopped under the safety of the eaves, while Lydia ran into the rain and stopped, her eyes searching for Humphrey.

“Humphrey!” she called at the top of her voice, rising onto her tiptoes. “Humphrey!”

“Don’t just stand there,” William cried.

Angela was on her tiptoes, too, though on the step near the front door to the house. She peered out into the gloom, but the rain was so heavy still and the air thick with gray storm clouds. It was impossible to see much further than arm’s length and Angela huffed, feeling as though every little thing was stacked against them.

“Go after him,” she cried. “It’s not too late. Go now!”

“Humphrey,” Lydia shouted once more. “Wait!”

“Has she seen him?” William asked, his voice rapid and urgent.

“Can *you* see him?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Angela said, still straining her neck.

“There’s a shape, yes, but . . .”

“Oh, she’d best find him. This is too much, Angela, I can’t bear to watch.”

“Yes!” Angela said suddenly, bubbling up with laughter. “Yes, it’s him! He’s stopped walking, he’s heard her.”

“Go on, Lydia,” William shouted again, though Lydia needed no encouragement.

She took off running, all the while calling Humphrey's name. Her hair flattened against her head; her gown soaked to the shape of her body. Angela, still on tiptoes, narrowed her eyes in the hopes she could see through the slashing rain.

"Is she there yet?" William asked. "Are they talking?"

"You have eyes just the same as me," Angela snapped. "But . . . but yes, I think she's there! They're talking. They're . . ."

"They're what?" William asked, his voice getting higher and higher with each question. "What are they saying?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Angela asked, though she still strained to see through the bad weather.

They seemed to be talking forever—for so long, in fact, that

Angela began to get worried.

“How long does it take to say *I love you too*, for goodness’ sake,” she muttered.

“Knowing Lydia, she’ll be explaining it in great detail,” William quipped.

Angela huffed again. “They’re going to catch their deaths if they stay out in this—oh, heavens!”

“What?” William cried. “What’s happening now?”

“I think . . . I think he’s kissing her! Oh William, it’s the sweetest thing. Can you see?”

William peered out over the gardens, but he shook his head. “Not really,” he said but then he gasped. “That was Lydia’s laugh! I’d recognize it anywhere.”

“It was. And . . . and . . .” Angela’s smile grew as she watched. “They’re coming back this way! Quick, William, get the door open.”

William did as he was asked, swinging it open just as Humphrey and Lydia ran up the steps, their whole bodies soaked through and shivering, but their eyes alight with love and passion.

“Mrs. Beaumont,” Angela said quickly. “Fetch some towels. Megan—hot tea, right away!”

* * *

“While everything I said to you earlier was true,” Lydia said,

gazing lovingly at Humphrey, “you cannot simply kiss me every time you want me to stop talking.”

She blew the steam from across the surface of her tea, not pulling her eyes away from her love. Angela couldn't stop staring at Lydia, though. Her whole face seemed to have changed, her body relaxed and content in a way Angela didn't think she'd ever seen before. Her sister radiated love, and it made Angela want to cheer in happiness.

The pair had changed out of their wet clothes, Humphrey borrowing an old suit of their father's until his own had dried, and now all four of them took tea in the parlor. Angela had been invigorated by the whole thing, and she couldn't wait to get Lydia alone, so she could hear every detail of what happened and what was said.

“Of course, I only did such a thing because I was so worried about you being out in the inclement weather,” Humphrey replied

with a sheepish smile. “I would never have dreamt of it in any other circumstance, you understand. Quite beyond what is proper.”

“Quite,” Lydia replied. She took a sip of her hot tea, though she still watched Humphrey over the rim of her cup, as though worried he might disappear if she took her eyes off him.

“It was, quite frankly, the most romantic thing I have ever seen,” Angela said as she stretched over the table and scrambled to reach the cake at the far side.

“It was an inspiration,” William said. Angela could hear the awe in his voice. He already loved Humphrey, too. “Perhaps when I meet the lady of my dreams, I can—”

“Hopefully do it all in the dry!” Humphrey laughed.

“And you have plenty of time for all that,” Angela said. “You’re still far too young to be thinking of marriage, William Stanley.”

“But today is a day for love, Angela,” he said. “We must embrace it.”

“Besides, I want to be first,” Angela said.

She chuckled in an attempt to show she was jesting, but the truth was that she hoped her turn would not be long. She imagined it had been Edward out there in the rain and she asked herself if she would have run out there, risking her health in the cold.

Would I?

The answer most definitely was yes. She would do almost anything to take hold of Edward’s love and to cherish it, if only he

could prove himself unlike his cousin.

As if reading her mind, Lydia took hold of her hand. “If I understand your feelings correctly—and I believe I do—then we have your own romance to fix, don’t we?”

Chapter 26

Edward had stewed for another two days, despite his conversation with the Earl. He knew it was time to seek Angela out, and he desperately wanted to, but he was also riddled with a fear he had never experienced before.

He was a confident man; he always had been. And yet, with Angela, he felt almost childlike. It was not that he didn't think himself worthy, but rather that he was terrified she would reject him. He would rather remember the happy times they shared, than think of her angry with him or offering him any more harsh words.

But his Uncle Mason was right, just as his own beliefs were. There was more to Angela's feelings than simply what she had put in the letter—so much more. If Edward could feel it, he was certain she could too.

The coach pulled up outside Angela's house, but Edward did not get out for a long moment. He simply looked up at the beautiful stonework and the ornate decorations that lined the roof. He admired the bright blue sky and the wispy clouds. He grounded himself in the things he could see, allowing them to calm his jittery heart.

When he was finally ready, he got out and walked slowly up the steps. It was then that he had the first inkling that something was not right. On every other occasion he had visited, the door had been opened before he even had a chance to ring the bell. Beaumont and his footmen were always vigilant.

That day, though, not only had Edward reached the bell and pulled on the rope, but he waited a full minute before anyone came to the door. When Beaumont finally arrived, he was evidently flustered.

"Mr. Lancaster," he said, his cheeks rosy. "I apologize for the wait. Do come in."

“Is everything all right?” Edward asked as he stepped into the entrance hall and took off his hat.

Beaumont took the hat blindly and put it into the cloakroom.

“It’s been an eventful day,” the butler admitted. “But it is not my place to say. Shall I take you to Lady Angela?”

“Is she available?”

“I would say she would be pleased to see you, sir.”

That made Edward inhale sharply, and he had to resist the urge of running through the house, calling out her name. Something had happened to his poor Angela!

“Mr. Edward Lancaster,” Beaumont announced when they entered the parlor, but Edward didn’t hear the words, for his entire focus was on the small figure huddled on the couch.

Angela was there, a blanket around her shoulders. Her skin was sickly pale and Edward was certain he could see her shoulders shaking. Lydia was on one side of her, and William on the other, and they both were fussing over her, asking if she was all right and telling her all would be fine.

Humphrey was there, too, and though Edward glanced briefly at him, it was only Angela he could really see.

“Edward!” Humphrey’s voice was bright; he was clearly happy to see the man.

“Humphrey,” Edward replied, his own voice heavy with worry,

and though he spoke to his friend, his eyes did not leave poor Angela.

“What’s going on?”

“Fret not,” Humphrey said, waving his hand in their direction.

“It’s over now.”

He grasped hold of Edward’s hand and shook it vigorously.

Edward finally looked at him, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“I—I’m sorry. What was that?”

Humphrey laughed and slapped Edward playfully on the back. “I just wanted to say thank you. For everything. It was because of your advice that I won the love of my life back.”

“What?” Edward asked, no clue what was going on. Humphrey laughed again.

“I took your advice, Edward, and Lydia responded . . . well . . .”

He glanced over at her and smiled broadly. “Positively.”

“I’m pleased for you both,” Edward managed. In truth, he did not care. Not right at that moment. He was far too worried about Angela.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“I’m glad I could have been of assistance, but Humphrey? What happened to Angela?”

Humphrey’s smile turned into a frown. “She’s had something of a run in with . . .”

“With your despicable cousin,” William snapped, his anger

palpable.

“It’s all right, William. I am not hurt,” Angela said quietly.

A small white hand snaked out from under the blanket and patted William’s knee as though to calm him. Edward could see that she was trying to be strong, but she was clearly distressed. Then Angela looked at him. “Your cousin came here an hour ago to see Lydia. I was the one who greeted him when he arrived since Lydia and Humphrey were out for a walk. William was upstairs.”

She paused in her speech, but William rubbed her hand to encourage her to continue, his anger still apparent. “When he asked for Lydia, I informed him that she no longer wished to see him and that as of immediately, their engagement was over. He laughed and thought me jesting until I told him that Humphrey and Lydia were together now.”

“And he was furious. So much so that he tried to take his anger out on my dear sister. That blasted monster. I’ll make him regret he ever touched Angela,” William said with a fury only matched by Edward’s.

“This is inexcusable. To think he would go this far as to touch you. I will beat him until he can’t tell his left from right,” Edward said in rage. Of all the worst things his cousin could have done, he went after the woman he loved because for once, he could not have what he desired. “My uncle will hear of this. If this had been a commoner, nothing could be done about this. But he assaulted a woman of the peerage. Surely, we can report this to the authorities.”

Edward looked at Angela again and saw that she was calm now. Then she stood, shed the blanket, and walked up to Edward. He desperately wanted to wrap his arms around her, make it all better, but he couldn’t. He knew he couldn’t.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, making his heart sing with the beauty of her voice. “I think I owe you an apology.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head firmly. “You owe me nothing, Angela.”

As he looked down at her, those eyes of hers sparkling up at him, he knew he’d made the right choice in coming here. Her love was as strong if not stronger than his, and as they stared into each other’s souls, the room around them melted away.

“Yes, I do,” she insisted. “I behaved irrationally. My letter to you was out of frustration and anger at my situation, not a true reflection of my feelings.”

“Very well,” he said, shaking his head. He would accept her apology if it meant they could finally talk about what was going on.

“But please, dear Angela, tell me. Did anything else happen?”

“It’s nothing,” Angela said. She turned her back to him and made her way back to the couch. “Just forget it. All will be fine by morning.”

“It’s not *nothing*!” William cried, jumping up to his feet.

“William,” Angela pleaded, but Lydia put a hand on her arm to quiet her.

“He needs to do this,” she said softly. “For you. And Mr. Lancaster deserves to know what happened.”

“I’ll tell you what happened next,” William snarled, taking an intimidating step towards Edward. He had his finger in the air, pointing at him. “Your rat of a cousin tried to wreck some of our

things in his anger.”

“James did this,” Edward said, the color draining from his cheeks as he realized his family had, yet again, done damage to this one.

“What did he do?”

“He destroyed some pottery and almost damaged treasured items that we have from our parents,” Lydia explained, her tone significantly calmer than that of her brother’s. “He did not take kindly to the revised situation.”

“Lydia and I finally came into the house and William was about ready to pummel him. When he asked if what they said was true about his and Lydia’s engagement being broken, he was beside himself when Lydia confirmed it,” Humphrey explained. He’d moved around to the back of the couch and now he rested his hands on Lydia’s shoulders—a proprietary action if ever there was one.

It was all beginning to fall into place for Edward. To find out that Lydia and Humphrey were courting would have definitely sent James over the edge. He'd never before had anyone tell him *no*, and now not only had he lost his future wife, but most likely his inheritance too. But to be desperate enough to harm a woman in public! The audacity of that man!

"That is no excuse," William shouted, spinning around and looking at his sister. "How can you be so calm about this?"

"Because the threat is gone, William," Lydia said firmly. "And there is nothing further we can do but move on."

Edward swallowed back the bile that had risen in his throat. "As I stated before, you can go to the authorities."

Edward watched Angela's reaction. She relived those moments,

shivering at the words. Lydia now stroked her hair and whispered in her ear, telling her once again that all would be well. Angela nodded her agreement—she knew it would be fine once she recovered from the shock. He ran to her and landed on his knees in front of her.

“Angela! I’m so dreadfully sorry you went through that.”

She smiled weakly at him. “It was not your fault, Edward,” she said, her eyes soft and full of love again.

“Even so . . . are you sure you’re all right?”

“As I keep telling everybody else,” she said, looking around at the other occupants in the room, “I am fine. Just a little shaken, that’s all. I promise you.”

He nodded, then with a sudden thought, he leapt to his feet.

“I am dreadfully sorry to leave so abruptly,” he said, looking around in urgency. “But I must go.”

“Go where?” Lydia asked.

“To put my cousin in his place. This was the final straw.”

He turned and ran from the room but Angela followed, and when he reached the entrance hall, he felt her hand on his arm, turning her back to him. She smiled, her smile lighting up her face in the way he had come to adore so very much.

“I love you, you know,” she said.

Edward’s strained expression turned into a grin, and though he

could sense Lydia, Humphrey, and William all watching wide-eyed from the parlor door, he only had eyes for Angela.

“And I you, Angela. We’ll talk soon, I promise.”

She nodded, let go of his arm, and he hurried out to his coach.

“Take me home,” he said to the coachman. “As quickly as you can.”

He was barely two miles out of the Dorset estate when he saw James walking forlornly by the side of the road. He tapped the roof of the coach to get the coachman to stop, and then he opened the window and called out to his cousin.

“Get in,” he said, trying not to let his true anger show. “Where is your coach?”

“I wanted to walk,” James said in an evident sulk as he slumped back in the seat opposite Edward. “The day is brightening up, is it not?”

“What’s happened?” Edward asked, though of course he knew. “You look vexed.”

“Vexed! Ha!” James shook his head. “That beast I was supposed to marry. Turns out she’s as beastly in personality as she is in looks. And that so-called former friend of mine.” He growled, his clenched fist shaking in his lap.

“Humphrey?”

“What a despicable human being he is,” James snarled. “The pair of them deserve to go to hell for what they have done to me. All my

plans have been ruined.”

“Perhaps they love one another,” Edward said through clenched teeth, though James did not hear him. He was far too interested in his own ire to listen to anything Edward could possibly say.

“And that sister of hers. Angela. What a tease, she—”

Before he could say another word, Edward’s fist landed squarely on James’ nose, the punch making a pleasant cracking sound in the air. It felt so good to let out his frustrations and to *finally* stop James from saying anything more.

James fell back against the seat, dazed and clutching his face, whimpering and confused. “What the bloody hell is your problem? How dare you touch me!”

Edward glared at him. "I dare indeed, you scoundrel. Going after a woman of the peerage will lead you into trouble, and this time Aunt Eugenia can't save you. I know what you did at the Dorset estate."

James was about to retort but stayed quiet as he held his nose. Perhaps now the consequences of his actions were starting to settle in.

"Take us home," Edward called out cheerfully to the coachman. "I have something I need to tell the Earl."

Chapter 27

“A letter for you, my lady,” Beaumont said as he entered the parlor. Both Lydia and Angela turned around.

“For me?” Lydia asked.

“Yes, my lady.”

It was more than a week after James’ assault on Angela, and things in the house had calmed significantly. She had worked hard on letting go of the past and moving forward, though she had not seen nor heard from Edward since that day.

She was not worried about that fact. She trusted in their love and knew they would see each other again soon. He no doubt had a lot to

deal with, thanks to James' latest actions. All she needed to do was give him the time and space he required.

She glanced over to the letter in her sister's hand and frowned. It had the Nordshire crest stamped into the wax seal.

"Are you certain that's not for me?" she asked. She became acutely aware of the steady beating of her heart, like a whisper telling her that Edward was close.

"Quite certain," Lydia replied, turning the letter around to show Angela the front. "Unless your name has suddenly become *Lady Lydia Stanley*."

The thick black letters were large and uneven, written by an unsteady hand, but the name was clear enough. The letter was addressed to her sister. Angela was both confused and irritated. Hadn't

she waited long enough to hear from Edward? And why was anyone from Nordshire writing to Lydia in the first place?

Lydia made some quip or other to Humphrey and the pair laughed together, but Angela couldn't focus on what they were saying. All she could do was watch the letter in her hands, not being opened, and she had to resist the urge to snatch it out of her sister's hands and read it herself.

It could be Lord Brighton writing, she thought. But then, he did not seem to have a calm enough soul to sit and write a letter. It could be Edward, then, but Angela couldn't think of a single reason he would be writing to Lydia rather than her. And the truth was, she didn't want either of them writing to her sister!

"Are you expecting a letter yourself, Angela?" Humphrey asked.

"You seem awfully keen."

He shuffled the cards without looking and tilted his head at her curiously. They were playing bridge, as had become their habit each afternoon, though Angela now felt jittery and impatient. Card games were the last thing on her mind.

“No,” she replied, quickly looking away from the letter to hide her eagerness. “I’m not waiting for anything.”

“So why would you think it would be for you?” William asked. He, too, looked at her with a questioning gaze.

Angela shifted in her seat and stuck her bottom lip out in a pout, but she didn’t reply. She simply frowned and looked down at her cards. She knew they were right, but she couldn’t help feeling somehow left out. She desperately wanted the letter to be from Edward, and *to* her.

“It’s your turn, William,” Humphrey said, his attention returned to the game.

Angela tried to focus on the hand she’d been dealt, but she could hear the snap of the wax seal and the crumple of the paper as her sister unfolded it.

“Oh, how delightful,” she cried, her cards face-down on the table and her eyes on the parchment in her hand.

“What is it?” Angela asked eagerly, sitting up straighter and turning to look directly at her sister.

Lydia looked over at her with a twist of a smile on her lips. “The Earl of Nordshire has invited me to his home for high tea tomorrow. And you’re invited too, Humphrey. He says he has something he wishes to discuss with us.”

“And what of me?” Angela asked, not giving poor Humphrey a chance to reply. “Am I invited also?”

Lydia pursed her lips and turned the paper over in her hands, teasing Angela as she pretended to search for her invitation. “No,” she said. “No, there’s no mention of you.”

“He was only here yesterday,” William said with a frown.

Angela thought back to the flustered earl’s brief visit the day before. He hadn’t said much, just that he’d received Lydia’s letter detailing Lord Brighton’s behavior, and that he intended to act upon the information.

“Perhaps he wants to persuade you that James is not so bad after all,” William suggested.

“I can’t imagine any father being that blind to his son’s actions, can you?” Humphrey said. “Perhaps he just wants to offer his thanks for bringing it to his attention.”

Lydia shrugged. “Whatever it is, I’m sure we will both be delighted to attend, won’t we, Humphrey? It feels like an age since we did something fun.”

“You mean other than running in the rain?” William teased.

“But I’ll be able to come, won’t I?” Angela asked, still stuck on the fact that she hadn’t been formally invited. “I mean, you’ll allow me to attend with you, won’t you?”

“Why on earth would you want to?” Lydia asked, turning a teasing eye on her sister. “You’ve never before been interested in my

business dealings. What has changed now?”

“It seems far too formal, if you ask me,” Humphrey said, catching Lydia’s eye and sharing a chuckle. “Not the sort of place for you, Angela.”

She growled and thumped the table with the side of her fist. “You are both terribly cruel! I’m not sure I even want to play cards with you any longer.”

Lydia laughed and put her hand over Angela’s closed fist. “We’re teasing you, dear sister. Don’t fret, of course you can come along. I shall write to Lord Nordshire right away to let him know we will *all* be attending.”

* * *

Angela spent the following morning in a fit of panic, with Megan running around trying to find the perfect outfit and fix the perfect curls.

“You’re beautiful as you are, my lady,” Megan said on more than one occasion. “And he loves you already, does he not? There’s no need to worry so.”

Angela huffed. She hoped he loved her already—he’d said as much, both in letter and in person—but that didn’t stop her worrying. She had barely seen him in weeks, and when she had, the visits had been fleeting. She desperately wanted to make a good impression at tea. It would be far too devastating if he changed his mind about her, and especially if it was because she had not selected the best gown!

“Maybe he does, yes, but I need to look my absolute best today. It needs to be neither too plain nor too fancy, neither too fitted nor too loose. Something that will make him take notice of me while

ensuring I do not stand out from the rest of the group.”

Megan giggled. “You’re overthinking this, my lady.”

“I’m not, Megan! Take this seriously, please! I want to look pretty but not overly so—I don’t want him thinking I am shallow, after all.”

“Very well,” the maid replied, though still with a laugh upon her lips as she disappeared into the wardrobe and brought out a selection of gowns she thought might be appropriate.

They settled on a burnt orange gown in the end, in a simple cotton with a bodice overlaid in the most delicate lace. Her blonde curls were pinned just so, a string of pearls placed over the top, and with simple pearls in her ears and around her neck.

“Goodness, you look beautiful,” Lydia declared when Angela

finally joined them that afternoon at the coach. “Is that a new gown?”

“Not new, no,” Angela replied. “But isn’t it just the loveliest?”

She truly did feel beautiful, and that helped to tame the quiver of nerves in her chest. She wanted Edward to look at her and have eyes only for her, and now she was confident that he would.

“Truly lovely,” Lydia replied with a smile. “Now come along. We’re going to be late. We’ve been standing here waiting for you for what feels like hours.”

“You look very pretty and refined,” Humphrey whispered to her as they climbed in the coach. “He is sure to notice it too.”

Angela felt herself blush. “I don’t think I know what you’re talking about, Humphrey.”

When they arrived, there was no one but the Countess in the entrance all. Angela looked about her in search of Edward, but he couldn't be seen anywhere. She huffed as quietly as she could. Her whole reason for being there was to catch at least a glimpse of him! She had no interest in the Earl and certainly not in the Countess.

“Good afternoon,” the Countess said, and Angela reluctantly gave her attention.

The Countess was a tall, thin woman with piercing eyes but features that seemed to sag from her face. Her lips were in a permanent sour pout and her eyes had lines around them from her squinting. She could not be described as a beautiful woman; she had a cold, hard look about her. And from what Angela had heard of her, she could not be described as an amiable one, either.

She already disliked her, but the way in which she looked them

all up and down set Angela on edge and she ground her teeth together.

“Humphrey,” the Countess said, her tone haughty and grating. “I must admit I wasn’t expecting to see you in my house again after what you did to my son. But perhaps, as you are here and you know everyone, would you care to do the introductions?”

“Of course,” Humphrey said, as bright and polite as he always was, ignoring her veiled insult. “Ladies, let me introduce Lady Eugenia Lancaster, Countess of Nordshire.”

“How do you do?” Lydia asked as she curtsied. Angela curtsied too, knowing it was expected of her even though she hated doing it.

“Lady Eugenia, this is Lady Lydia Stanley and her sister, Lady Angela Stanley.”

Eugenia pursed her lips even further as she blatantly examined Lydia's scarred cheek. She didn't even try to hide the fact that she was staring. Angela could sense her sister getting uncomfortable, her one good cheek blushing, but as always, Lydia took it without saying a word.

"So this is *the* Lydia, then," the Countess said with a snarl, her eyes still on Lydia's damaged flesh. She let out a bark of laughter. "All of this hurt over such an ugly little thing!"

"I—"

Humphrey went to retort, but Lydia put a hand on his arm and smiled at him, her gentle nod reassuring him that she was fine. But Angela was enraged. To invite them for tea and then insult them before they were even in the house properly!

“Don’t listen to her, Lydia,” she snapped quite without thinking.

“I doubt Lady Nordshire would know ugly if she saw it. After all, she looks in the mirror without much trouble every day!”

The air froze and everyone turned their surprised eyes on Angela, the quiet one, the gentle, kindhearted one. Even Angela herself was shocked that the words had come out of her mouth, and she immediately gasped, her eyes widening with the realization of what she had just done.

The Countess glared at her. “How dare you come into this—”

Angela froze, her mouth open as she thought what to say, when the sound of laughter behind her made her turn around.

“That *was* rather improper, Angela,” Edward said, smiling at her

as he walked into the entrance hall, the Earl just behind him.

Angela felt her cheeks flush a deep, embarrassed red and she winced as she looked at him, expecting at least an admonishing glare. But when she faced him properly, he didn't seem upset. In fact, he was smiling.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, wanting to make her case all the same.

"I didn't mean to—"

"I have no doubt that whatever my aunt said to provoke you was equally if not more improper than anything you could ever say."

"Mason!" the Countess cried, marching over to the Earl. "Are you going to let this insolent young girl insult me in my own home? I demand that you turn her out this instant!"

“Oh, hush, Eugenia,” the Earl said, patting her on the shoulder like a naughty dog. “You and your son both deserve everything you get.”

Angela’s eyes widened, shocked at such harsh words in front of guests, and she glanced nervously back at Lydia and Humphrey. Her sister shrugged, equally as surprised, but Angela could see a satisfied glee in her eyes.

“*My* son? You mean *our* son, don’t you?” Eugenia protested, stamping her foot down onto the wooden floor. “The true son of our marriage, unlike that useless orphan nephew of yours.”

She sneered at Edward and Angela once again felt her ire rising. She went to step in, to shout at this despicable excuse for a woman, when Edward stepped in instead. His tone was cool and collected when he turned to his aunt, and his smile was wide.

“I would not be so quick to anger, auntie. For your son has made a misstep with our guests. One that could land him in the courts if they see fit to take action.”

“The courts? What are these people accusing him of? He is a good boy who is in good societal standing,” she said with a huff. She looked at her husband for an explanation, but when he merely gave her a knowing look, her face paled and she remained silent. Angela could only assume that she was not aware of the recent encounter that they had with her son. She thought for a moment if she should tell the Countess what occurred but then the Earl continued.

“We will discuss these things later, dear wife. As for now, I wish to entertain our guests.”

Chapter 28

“Shall we move through to the drawing room?” Edward asked brightly. “Tea is soon to be served.”

He had not intended to have an argument in front of their guests, and certainly not in front of guests he cared so much about, but he had just been so enraged when he heard his aunt being rude to the woman he loved. And he could not help but be proud of Angela’s comment, regardless of how improper it might have been.

He turned to lead the way to the parlor, and as he did so, he thought of Angela. She looked incredibly beautiful, even more so than he remembered, and he was so pleased she had joined her sister that afternoon.

He could just picture it, Angela inviting herself along in that

gently forceful way of hers. She was a feisty one and no mistake, but with it she was kind and gentle and honorable. She only ever stood her ground where it was true and fair.

“I have one of my headaches coming on,” Aunt Eugenia said, making him turn back to her with a frown.

She had her nose in the air and an unhappy scorn across her face. Edward was pleased she was making her excuses; he didn't want to sit at the table with her or have to listen to her nasty jibes all afternoon. But he quickly chastised himself for his uncharitable thought. He should be helping his aunt become better, not shunning her.

“Oh, what a terrible shame,” the Earl said. “You'll be missed, but I am certain we all hope you feel better soon.”

Edward had always been impressed by his uncle's ability to

sound so genuine, but then he supposed Mason had had years of practice. It was saddening, in truth, that any marriage was like that at all, and especially that of his uncle. It seemed that Mason and Eugenia had barely ever been friends, let alone sweethearts.

Edward himself would never get into such a situation, no matter what, and now he was a viscount, he could make sure of it. His own marriage, the one he pictured with his beautiful Angela, would be one of openness and honesty. It would be one of love and affection, not lies and deception. It would be a mutual agreement between them, rather than a forced union that benefited everyone but themselves.

“Take a seat,” he said warmly as he opened the door to the drawing room and held out his arm in welcome.

Under his instruction and careful supervision, the table had been laid in such a manner that it was both enticing and exciting. There were all the typical cakes and sandwiches, as well as not one but two

pots of tea!

But it was the presentation that looked particularly appealing. The cakes had been arranged on stands of different heights, with edible flowers laid between them. The sandwiches were artfully stacked. The tea was served in the finest china pots that had been handed down through their family for generations, and they sat on white cast iron trivets to protect the table from their heat.

“Heavens, what a treat!” Angela exclaimed in sheer joy as she walked in. Her eyes were wide, and she laughed in a childlike delight that warmed Edward’s heart. He knew he could always rely on Angela to show such simple, uncomplicated happiness at the smallest of things, and it was the reaction he had been hoping for.

“This all looks very lovely,” Lydia said politely, though she also had a wide smile. “You’ve gone to an awful lot of trouble just for us.”

She took a seat between Humphrey and Angela, and Edward sat between Angela and his uncle.

“Nonsense,” the Earl replied as he took his own seat. “Nothing is too much trouble. I have something important to discuss with you—something I mentioned briefly in my letter yesterday. And besides, Edward here did most of the preparations.”

“You did all this, Edward?” Angela looked up at him with eyes that sparkled, and he nodded shyly. He felt a strange mix of foolishness and pride all at the same time.

There came a lull in the conversation as the maid poured the tea, but once everyone had added their sugar and stirred in their milk, the Earl took a deep breath and began to talk.

“As much as I am enjoying the afternoon already, I must admit

that the reason I asked you to come here is rather an unfortunate one. Your earlier letter deeply saddened me, along with what my nephew has told me.”

Lydia sighed. “I hope you didn’t mind my writing to you, my lord,” she said. “But I felt it important for you to understand why I had to break my engagement with your son.”

Uncle Mason chuckled humorlessly. “I understand it perfectly, my lady, and please do not feel bad about it. I would expect nothing less from a lady of your caliber.” He sighed. “I had hoped that my son had changed—it certainly seemed that way when he returned from London, full of the happy news that he was to be married and to one of the finest women in England!”

Edward glanced over at Lydia as his uncle spoke. She clearly felt some satisfaction in his words as she blushed, and he thought she demonstrated the perfect mix of pride and humility.

His uncle sucked in his breath. “But alas, your letter, as well as a number of other accounts I have received from other people, have shown me that not only has James not improved, but he has actually gotten worse. And he has been neglecting his responsibilities as a titled member of society.”

“I told my uncle all about the things James has said and done,” Edward added. “And there have been others who have told similar tales. Unbeknownst to me, Uncle Mason had been keeping track of the business dealings James had been doing and realized just how mismanaged the Brighton estate had been. It will take some time to get the finances straightened out and appease the tenants and business partners.”

“Indeed,” Uncle Mason said. “My son has proven that he will never be ready to handle these responsibilities nor does he have the moral standing that a person of his stature should have. And so it is with a heavy heart that I have officially disinherited him. He is my

son, and as such he will always be taken care of, but he will not receive the comforts he has enjoyed up until now.”

“I am saddened to hear that such a thing was necessary,” Lydia said. “But I must admit that I think you have made the right decision, and I am relieved to hear that he no longer has any power.”

“Yes, indeed. Though both I and his mother share blame in his upbringing. I should have been firmer on him and provided more structure,” Mason continued. “I strongly believe that an earl has a duty to his people and to his estate, and I don’t think James has the capability to serve in the way a true nobleman should.”

“Quite right,” Humphrey replied. “Integrity is such an important trait. Lydia herself taught me that as she helped me learn how to run my own estate.”

Edward felt truly relaxed for the first time in such a long time. He'd never wanted James to be disinherited, and he certainly didn't want to become titled himself.

But now that it had happened, he found himself at peace. It felt *right* in the way that nothing truly had until now, and it was made all the better by the fact that he no longer had to be concerned about his cousin's actions. Although being in a scholarly setting did not help his cousin develop better character like himself, James could possibly become reformed working for the church or in the navy even at his age.

"Will Edward become Earl then?" Angela asked.

"Angela!" Lydia snapped. "Don't be so impertinent."

The Earl chuckled. "It's quite all right. It will be up to parliament

to determine if I can officially do that. I am hopeful that my nephew, Edward, will take my title of Earl of Nordshire when I die.”

Angela widened her eyes in excitement at him, and he had to stop himself from breaking out into laughter. She had such a sweet innocence about her that he simply adored.

“I wish to formally apologize to you, Lady Lydia, and to you, Humphrey—and your families, of course—for the damage that my son did to both of you.”

Lydia gushed in reply and Humphrey thanked him kindly. The three of them set off chattering about different topics as everyone continued to eat their meal. Edward stopped listening, though, for he turned and looked at Angela, her profile perfect in the sunlight.

“Angela,” he said softly so as not to draw everyone’s attention.

She turned to him and her smile broadened.

“I’m pleased to see you,” she said, her greeting different this time. This time, it was for him and him alone, and it set his pulse racing.

“I will forever remember the look on my aunt’s face when you spoke to her,” he said, offering her a one-sided, mischievous smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything so amusing.”

“Oh no!” Angela winced and covered her face with her hands, though there was a giggle in her throat. “I’m dreadfully sorry. I don’t know what got into me—”

“Angela, stop,” he said, laughing. “Don’t apologize—it was brilliant!”

She dropped her hands and pressed her lips together as she smiled at him. “Do you really think so?”

“She deserved it completely,” he said. “And don’t ever apologize for being who you are, Angela. Because who you are is wonderful.”

“Don’t you think, Edward?”

Edward jumped at the sound of his name and spun around, blinking and embarrassed at having been caught out.

“Don’t I think what?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” Humphrey said, winking at Edward. “I hadn’t realized you were so distracted.”

He felt a warmth in his cheeks, and he glanced back at Angela. “One can’t help it, when there is a distraction in the room,” he said.

“All right, plenty of time for that sort of thing,” the Earl said, frowning at Edward. “Today is a day to set aside our family differences and look to the future. I was just telling Humphrey what a wonderful card player you are, and he suggested a tournament. What do you think?”

“I would wager William would want to get in on that as well,” Lydia said with a laugh. “He does like a game of cards.”

“And he does rather like to think of himself as one of the men now, doesn’t he?” Angela said, laughing at the thought.

“He’s not far off, to be fair,” Humphrey added. “And he has both the intelligence and moral standing to hold his own.”

“Well, then William must join us,” Edward declared. “And I suppose, Humphrey, that our friendship will continue to grow, won’t it?”

Humphrey laughed. “We’ll certainly be spending plenty of time together, since we’re courting sisters now.”

The conversation around the table instantly stopped, a tension hanging in the air. Humphrey looked awkwardly about him, realizing from the look Lydia shot him that he had made some *faux pas*, and Edward swallowed, his breath shallow as everyone looked to him and Angela for a response.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Humphrey said after a long pause. “Was I mistaken?”

Edward turned to glance at Angela, a questioning eyebrow raised, and to his relief, she broke out into another smile.

“No, Humphrey,” she said softly, putting a hand on Edward’s arm and looking across the table. “No, you are not mistaken in the least.”

Chapter 29

One Month Later

“Oh yes,” Lydia declared as the modiste held the fabric up against Angela. “That color is just perfect for you, and it will match my own gown wonderfully.”

Angela looked down at the pink fabric, a few shades darker than Lydia’s own, and she grinned.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it? And this silk is just divine,” she said before looking up at Lydia. “Are you sure you won’t have a new gown of your own? It is your wedding day! Whoever thought of a bride of your caliber in a hand-me-down gown!”

The modiste giggled as she rolled the fabric back onto the bolt. “You’d be surprised. I find myself altering many a mother’s gowns for

young brides. It's quite the fashion, these days. I think it brings a sense of connection."

"Exactly! Thank you, Anna, you've proved my point," Lydia said with a triumphant smile.

"But you could have any gown in the whole world!"

"Angela, don't you remember when we were little girls, and we would go through mother's wardrobe?"

"You were always fascinated by her wedding gown," Angela agreed with a nod. "And it is very beautiful."

"I was in awe of it. I think I still am! The very first day we found it, I must have only been seven or eight years old, and I decided there and then that I would wear that gown on my own wedding day.

Whenever I've pictured getting married since, it's always been in that gown."

"I suppose," Angela reluctantly agreed. "And it will look perfect on you. It just seems a shame you will not have something new to make the day truly special."

"Dearest sister, not everything new holds the same value as something passed down from mother to daughter. Wearing Mother's gown will make my day even more special than it could ever possibly be," Lydia said. "Especially as she and Father can't be with us."

"You're right," Angela said, taking Lydia's hand as she stepped down from the dressmaker's podium. "You're absolutely right."

Their mother's gown, though old in style, was timeless in its beauty, and Angela knew it would suit Lydia perfectly with its tight

ivory bodice and full-bodied pale pink skirts that flared at the hips. The dressmaker would modify the dramatic flare, but not enough to take away the shape of the gown.

“There’s tea in the front room,” the modiste called from her desk, looking up at them from her ledger. “If you’d like to take a seat and enjoy a cup or two, you’re quite welcome. I’ll be quite a while drawing up the design I have in mind for this special day.”

“That would be lovely, thank you.” Lydia smiled.

“Oh yes, a lovely cup of tea would be a treat, I’d say.”

As they seated themselves around the table, they were already in full discussion about wedding preparations. Angela’s spirits were always high when she was having a new gown made, but now that she was having one made for Lydia’s wedding, she was even more heady

with excitement. It made her feel light and childlike.

“I still can’t quite believe you’re getting married,” she said with glee as she picked the teapot up and went to pour Lydia a cup.

“I know,” Lydia replied, her voice almost shaky with nerves. “In some respects, I feel far too old to be marrying anyone—what with running the estate and helping to raise you and William. I feared what people thought of me. I let these marks on my body dictate my life for so long, I sometimes feel as though my time had passed.”

“Oh no, Lydia,” Angela said quickly, putting her hand out to her sister. “You must not think like that. Your time is yet to come.”

Lydia held a finger up and laughed. “I hadn’t finished,” she said. “I was going to say that, at the same time, I feel far too *young* to be married! Part of me feels as if I’m still that seven-year-old girl, trying

on Mother's gown while she isn't looking."

"She'd be so very proud of you, dear sister," Angela said—and she meant it. *If Mother were here now, she would be proud of the people we have become.*

"It's so lovely to have this day with just you, Angela," Lydia said, smiling at her over the rim of her teacup. "As much as I adore William, he's still too young to truly understand all this."

"And when he does, he's far too manly about it," Angela laughed. "No, this day is for ladies only!"

"And as for Humphrey and Edward . . . Well, I thought it important we take some time to remember we will always be sisters and always be there for one another, no matter what happens."

Angela smiled softly, a contentedness laying itself across her heart. She knew Lydia would always be there, of course she did, but that didn't stop the niggling fear that once she was married, Angela would be quite alone and lost.

"You're right again," she said. "As you always are."

"I am, aren't I?" Lydia said in mock arrogance before breaking down into laughter.

"No, actually," Angela said with a gasp. "No, this last season has proven that you *are not* always right, hasn't it?"

Lydia pursed her lips and frowned at Angela. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"If it was up to always-analytical Lydia, you'd no doubt already

be married, but to that horrid James Lancaster, and you'd probably be regretting it already."

Lydia visibly shuddered. "Yes, well, the less said about that, the better. We all make mistakes sometimes, Angela."

"But goodness, that would have been a particularly bad mistake."

"Oh, enough already. No need to make me feel any worse about it!"

"I suppose what I'm trying to say," Angela said, trying to stop herself from laughing, "is that *I* was right all along. Lord Brighton *was* a mistake. And Humphrey *does* love you—he always did."

"Yes," Lydia admitted with a bow of her head. "You were indeed right in this one, rare, instance."

“I think the correct thing to say here—and you might not like it—is *I told you so*.”

“How very humble of you, dear sister,” Lydia said with a smirk.

Angela couldn’t resist sticking her tongue out at Lydia, in the same way she used to when they were young. Lydia burst into laughter, and Angela was not far behind her, the two young ladies doubled over the table and giggling like children. It may not have been ladylike, and certainly not in public, but it felt so free and light—a feeling that was, at last, becoming their norm.

“Yes,” Lydia admitted once she’d caught her breath. “I rather suppose you did me a great service.”

They lapsed into a companionable silence as they each drank

their tea. Angela could tell Lydia wanted to say more, but she waited patiently. If there was one thing she had learned about her sister over the season, it was that she couldn't be pushed. That only ever led to resistance.

For her own part, Angela had learned a lot about herself, too. She had learned what love was, of course, and the value of true friendship. But she'd also learned that even if she had the best intentions, she could not force people to do what she wanted. She had to mature into a lady that took other people's feelings into consideration and gave the best advice possible, but ultimately she had to learn to let others decide their own fates. The last remnants of her childhood were melting away, and though that came with a hint of sadness, it was overwhelmed by the hope and happiness she knew the future would bring.

After a few minutes, Lydia spoke again, but it was so softly that Angela wasn't certain she'd heard it. Lydia wasn't even looking at her but focusing on the remains of her tea instead.

“Thank you,” Lydia repeated, a little louder this time, and she turned to look at her.

“Whatever for?” Angela asked.

“For everything.” Lydia shrugged and smiled shyly. “For all your help throughout all this. You’re right—I would have made the greatest mistake of my life if it hadn’t been for you, and I’m incredibly grateful for everything you did. I even managed to find true love, something I thought could never possibly happen for me.”

Angela took Lydia’s hand in her own and squeezed it. “It was the very least I could do, Lydia,” she said. “Since Mother and Father died, you have been the only real stability in my life. You are like a mother to me in your own right, almost as much as you are my sister.”

They embraced, Lydia's warm arms reminding Angela of all the times she had comforted her and William after that fateful day.

"You don't need me any longer though," Lydia said as she sat back in her chair. "You do know that you're strong enough to handle anything, don't you? There is nothing that can hold you back, Angela. You must remember that."

"I'll remember," she said, though she shifted uncomfortably in her chair. That sounded far too much like a goodbye for her liking, and she wasn't ready for that. "Oh! Did you hear about the girl to whom William has taken a fancy?" she asked, changing the subject.

Lydia gasped and turned wide eyes on her sister. "No! Tell me more."

"All right," Angela said, settling into her seat once more. "But

you must promise not to tell him I told you, or he'll never tell me another thing again."

"I promise. Tell me!"

"He wouldn't give me her name or any real details about her, but he's convinced he's in love. Apparently, he even asked Humphrey for advice on how to approach the whole situation! Though I'm not sure *Humphrey* is the right person to go to in that matter." Angela snorted with laughter.

"Humphrey is very romantic, thank you very much," Lydia cried defensively.

"Perhaps," Angela said, cocking her head to one side. "But he's not exactly quick about it, is he?"

Lydia giggled. “Well, no, I suppose you’re right about that. But I shall have to ask him everything he knows. See if he has any more information about this mystery girl.”

Angela shrugged. “Knowing William’s inability to settle on anything, and his youthful nature, I would not be too surprised if it turns out to be several different girls at different times.”

Lydia threw her head back and laughed. “How scandalous! Thank goodness he still has his age to protect his reputation. Once he’s introduced to society, the poor young ladies of his age will not know what has hit them!”

“He’ll no doubt charm the lot of them and have them falling at his feet,” Angela said, giggling.

“We’ll have to keep an eye out for that boy,” Lydia said with a

sigh. "But at least he will now have Humphrey's good influence to steer him in the right direction."

"And yours," Angela said. "Don't discount what a wonderful job you've done already."

"It will be so strange once I'm married," Lydia said, looking off into the distance.

"In what way?"

"Living with Humphrey at Somerset Hall, I mean. Life is going to change a lot."

"Strange for you? It'll be far stranger for me. With you gone and William staying with you when he's not at school, I shall rattle around that big old house quite alone."

She frowned and looked down at her hands, the happiness of the moment spiked with sorrow at what was to come. It would indeed be strange to live alone, with only the servants for company.

Dorset estate had gone from a full, happy home when their parents were alive, to a smaller, more intimate family after the accident. And now, even her siblings were leaving, and Angela would be the last remnant of their life together until William came of age and took his title fully.

“I’m ready for you now,” the modiste called from the other room, and the sisters rose to their feet to check over her designs.

But before they could go, Lydia caught hold of Angela’s arm and threw her a knowing look.

“Angela, dearest sister, worry not. Having seen you and a certain someone together, I doubt that you will be alone for long.”

Chapter 30

Three Months Later

It was Lydia and Humphrey's wedding, and what a glorious day it was. Angela wore her new pink gown, and Edward had a freshly tailored suit. It was a quiet affair, with only them and Maria and Andy in attendance, as William walked Lydia down the aisle towards Humphrey and Mr. Joe, Humphrey's best man.

Angela and Edward huddled together in the church pew as they watched the ceremony, perhaps a touch closer than was strictly proper, but Edward could not deny he enjoyed the sensation of heat that came off her. He wanted to put his arms around her and shower her with love, but that would have to wait.

He didn't know what he wanted to look at more, and so he turned his head frequently. At one moment, he watched the love that bloomed ahead of him as the couple got married, and at the next

moment, he turned to gaze at his own love.

To imagine it was them up there, instead of Lydia and Humphrey, sent an excited shiver through his body. He hoped and prayed it would not be long until it was their turn, and that Angela didn't change her mind in the meantime. He was then filled with determination to ask her to marry him that day, after the wedding festivities had concluded.

Afterwards, they celebrated at Somerset Hall, along with many other guests. The ballroom had been cleared and decorated especially for the occasion. Long tables ran down the length of the room, and they had been filled with ever tasty delight imaginable, interspersed with huge bouquets of flowers in pinks and peaches.

"The staff have done a great job," Edward said, looking appreciatively around him.

“It’s beautiful,” Angela agreed. “They must have worked very hard.”

Together, they ate and drank, talking with many of the wedding guests. Edward was having a wonderful time, and he already felt part of the family. They had accepted him, welcomed him, and after all the damage his family had done, he was grateful for their kindness and understanding.

Still, it wasn’t a day for sadness or reflection, but a day for joy and looking ahead to the future. He danced once with Angela, but as the set came to an end, an elderly gentleman cut in and asked if she would dance with him.

Angela beamed, and she quickly accepted, and though Edward was saddened to no longer have her in his arms, he knew he still had one dance left to come. He wandered from the dance floor, leaving her to enjoy the dance, and he stopped to talk to more guests, including

William.

“So you’re the gown-soaker,” William said when they were left alone. Edward was so taken by surprise at the comment that he let out a hearty laugh.

He supposed that, if he were to have a reputation, that was better than many other possibilities. But it did leave him curious about what Angela had said. She’d obviously spoken of him to her brother about the comical encounters they had.

“Is that all she’s told you about me?” he asked, an eyebrow raised and his lips twisted into a one-sided smile.

William chuckled and shook his head. “No, actually. It was the *first* thing she told me, but not the *only* thing. I might be betraying her confidence here, but I think she is truly in love with you. I believe

your courtship will turn into a marriage soon.”

Edward laughed again, pleased to hear it. He liked William already, and he hoped they would become good friends as he became an adult. *And once Angela and I are married.* He smiled to himself and looked down at his feet, a little embarrassed at the flush of emotion he felt.

“Well, thank you,” he said, glancing back up at William. “I appreciate you saying that.”

“You’re not going to throw anything all over her when you propose though, are you?” William asked, his lips in a pout of mockery.

Edward rolled his eyes. “All right,” he said. “No need for that. Duke you may be, and the brother of the lady I am courting, but don’t

forget your age, young man.”

“Very well,” William said with a sigh. “I suppose I ought to do the brotherly thing and properly ask after your intentions. Are you going to ask my sister to marry you?”

Edward paused, surprised that such a direct question had been asked by such a young man. He shouldn't have been surprised, though. It seemed directness was a Stanley trait and William was nothing if not a typical Stanley.

“I intend to, yes,” Edward said, inhaling deeply to try to steady his nerves. “Sooner rather than later, I hope.”

“Good,” William replied with a sharp nod of his head. “I hope you do. With Lydia and Humphrey married, and you with Angela, I believe our little family will be almost complete.”

“Almost?” Edward asked, looking at William curiously. The boy blushed, his cheeks turning as pink as his sister’s so often did. He could be talking about their parents, of course, lost at such a young age, but Edward didn’t think so. There was something of a romantic nature in those flushed cheeks.

“Almost,” William repeated, looking away to show how he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Now that you mention it,” Edward said, teasing him again. “I believe I have seen you making furtive glances at a particular young lady. And a very pretty young lady she is, too.”

“There have been no glances,” William said immediately, his defensive tone evident.

“Oh yes,” Edward said. “Now that I think of it, I do believe it’s a certain baron’s young sister, is it not? Someone not yet debuted into society? But I’d say she’ll cause quite a scene when she finally does.”

“One cannot be blamed for having one’s eye caught,” William said snootily, his cheeks flaming now. “But it’s nothing, truly.”

Edward chuckled and glanced over at Angela. “That much is true,” he muttered.

After a pause, William looked at him seriously. “Do you think love always wins?” he asked. “Or is it sometimes lost?”

Edward hesitated, letting the question sink in before he answered. It was the type of question that deserved consideration, even if love had won for him.

“Love is a powerful force, William,” he said eventually. “But it also requires work and effort and care. It will always win, but only if you let it.”

“This looks like a serious conversation. Mind if I join in?”

Edward turned to see the bridegroom, a glass of champagne clutched to his chest and the biggest possible smile across his face. The glint in his eye spoke of his pride and his happiness, and the true contentment he now felt.

“Always welcome, Humphrey,” he said. “I’ve just been getting to know young William a little better.”

“And a good job, too,” Humphrey said. “Because we’ll be setting up that card game sooner rather than later.”

“We could make it a whole tournament—a bit of fencing, chess, maybe even a little shove ha’penny,” William said eagerly.

“Shove ha’penny?” Humphrey asked with a confused but amused grin. “Where have you been playing such a game?”

William shrugged. “They teach all sorts of things at Eton these days.”

Edward let out a snort of laughter. Not only was the young duke entertaining and kindly, but he was funny with it.

“What they haven’t been teaching him, however, is the art of love,” Edward said to Humphrey, his eyes wide.

“A fine and delicate art indeed,” Humphrey replied. “Is it the same young lady you once asked me advice about?”

“It might be, yes,” William said shyly, looking away to hide his embarrassment.

“And she is here this evening,” Edward added, winking at Humphrey. “William has been gazing at her all night.”

“I have not,” William snapped defensively, though the flash of embarrassment in his eyes was enough to convince Humphrey of the truth.

“And you haven’t asked her to dance yet?” Humphrey asked in mock outrage. “How terribly remiss.”

William looked panicked, shooting glances at each of them, and Edward had to push his lips together to prevent himself from laughing.

“Should I have?” he asked. “I didn’t even think . . . Oh no! I hope I haven’t ruined my chances.”

“It wouldn’t do any harm,” Edward reasoned.

“She might even like the idea,” Humphrey added. “Go on, it will be good practice for you, if nothing else.”

William glanced over at the young lady in question, then back at Edward and his brother-in-law. “You’re absolutely certain she won’t laugh at me?” he asked.

“As certain as we can be,” Humphrey said.

“If you don’t try, you’ll never know,” Edward said. “I think both

Humphrey and I can safely attest to that.”

He laughed, and William nodded with a serious expression. “Yes, you’re right. I’ll go and ask her.”

He didn’t leave for a whole minute, though, looking down at his shiny boots as he bolstered his own confidence. Edward and Humphrey watched him, but they said nothing more until he was halfway across the hall to the lady in question.

“Good luck,” Humphrey called out, and William waved him away.

“He’s going to be a handful when he comes of age,” Edward said, head cocked as he watched.

“And good on him for it,” Humphrey replied with a chuckle. “He

will make some young lady a fine match one day.”

“Do you think it’ll be her?” Edward asked, nodding over at the girl who now looked overjoyed at the prospect of dancing with William.

Humphrey shrugged. “You never know, but even if it’s not, I’m glad he’s getting a little practice in now.” He laughed. “Perhaps if I’d had such a friend at his age, I wouldn’t have had such trouble admitting my true feelings to Lydia.”

“I can see the truth in that,” Edward said a little wistfully. “Though the romantic in me hopes it is her. To witness a love seeded at such a young age would be a wondrous thing.”

“Be careful, my friend, you’ll be sounding like me if you carry on.”

Edward laughed and turned to face his new friend. He slapped Humphrey amicably on the back. "I meant to say, congratulations on your marriage. Even I can see how truly you care about one another."

"Thank you," Humphrey replied with a knowing smile. "For a long while there, I didn't think it would happen, but I'm so very glad it has."

"And I," Edward chuckled. "It has given Angela and me a reason to keep in contact, though in truth I would never have let her go without a fight. Fate seems to want us together, and I cannot disagree with fate."

"Speaking of the devil," Humphrey said, grinning as Angela approached them.

“You’re not talking about me, are you?” she said. “I’m certainly no devil.”

“You look flushed,” Edward said, noticing that the color on her cheeks matched the pink of her gown. Even the tip of her nose had turned pink. “Did you enjoy your dance?”

“I did,” she said with a smile. “It was great fun. There’s something wonderful about movement and music, isn’t there? Especially when it’s a fast-paced number. It makes one feel truly alive.”

You make me feel alive.

“Well, in that case,” Edward said, Humphrey forgotten behind him now that Angela had arrived. “Perhaps I am able to claim a second dance?”

“That is an offer I simply cannot refuse,” Angela replied, holding her hand out for him to take. Edward glanced back at Humphrey, who nodded his encouragement.

As they stepped towards the ballroom floor, the music changed, the string quartet going from something jaunty and upbeat to a slow, romantic waltz. Edward raised his eyebrows at her and she giggled, her whole face lighting up with delight. Together, they fell into each other’s arms.

He could feel the warmth of her hand on his shoulder, of her other on his waist, and he could sense her body so close to his. She smelled of lavender—his new favorite scent—and her eyes reflected the flickering golden candlelight of the chandeliers.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look today?” he asked, head tilted in question.

“Only about a hundred times,” she said with a shrug.

“Let’s make it a hundred and one, then,” he said. “You look incredibly beautiful today, Angela.”

“Why, thank you,” she said as he spun her around. “That’s kind of you to say.”

“Now that I think of it, you look incredibly beautiful every day. How on earth did I manage to catch a sparkling diamond such as yourself?”

“Stop it,” she said, giggling again. “You’re being silly.”

“I’m not,” he protested. “I really do think myself the luckiest man

in England. In the world, even! I love you ever so much, Angela. And I always will.”

“And I love you, Edward, more than I ever thought it possible to love anyone. But now, can we dance in peace? Let the music speak of your love, and your words can do the job after.”

He smiled down at her, his chest full with his swelling heart, and they danced in a comfortable silence. She fit so perfectly within his arms, and he dreamed of the days when they could lounge around in the sunshine, her head tucked in the crook of his arm as they told each other stories.

He imagined children running around them, teasing each other and playing their games. He could already hear Angela directing them here and there, joining in on their fun and letting them hide while she pretended to seek. They would have one of each—a boy and a girl—at the very least, but maybe more. He would do his uncle proud by

continuing the Lancaster line.

“Hasn’t it just been the most wondrous day?” she asked, pulling him out of his daydream.

He looked into her eyes as he nodded. “Truly,” he said, thinking of her more than of the day.

“And to think it almost didn’t happen,” she said. “I can’t imagine a wedding between Lord Brighton and Lydia being even half as lovely.”

“It would have been a somber affair, that’s for certain,” Edward said with a chuckle.

But our wedding will be perfect, because you will be there.

“Positively miserable!” she declared. And then, “Oh, what a shame,” Angela said with a pout.

“What is?” he asked, suddenly confused and wondering if he had missed something she had said.

“The music is coming to an end,” she said. “And we’ve already had our two dances for the evening.”

“You’re right,” he said. “That really is a dreadful shame.” An idea came to him then, and he grinned at her. “But perhaps there is a way we can continue this.”

“How?” she asked, her brow heavily furrowed with the question.

He loved how she showed her every thought and feeling in the expressions on her face. She was lovely in every single sense.

“I was wondering if you’d care to take a stroll outside with me?”
he asked. “Alone.”

Chapter 31

As they walked from the ballroom, Angela's cheeks had turned red, and she felt as though her whole face was burning. Her heart pounded in her chest, her pulse was racing, and her breath was shallow. She was leaving the room. With Edward!

She could feel everyone's eyes on them, following them to the door, but no one moved to stop them. Their dance had been breathtaking, and when he suggested they go for a walk, Angela had jumped at the chance of a little more time with him and only him.

But as they found their way through the house and out of the front door, into the grounds of Somerset Hall, Angela realized that this act could only mean one of a very few things. For a gentleman to ask for time alone with a lady was very unusual indeed, and she knew how much Edward liked to uphold his moral code.

Could this day really get any better?

She shivered, her body shaking gently with anticipation and hunger. Edward led her down a path that ran perpendicular to the house, the mud long dried and hardened from the sun. He said nothing, but his silence was neither awkward nor uncomfortable. In fact, Angela felt only warmth and happiness coming from him.

“Here,” he said eventually. “Let’s stop here.”

She looked at him curiously, and then at the place he had chosen. It felt to her as though he’d planned this, as if he’d known this was where he was going to stop all along. But she quickly put that thought out of her mind. His invitation had been spur-of-the-moment, impulsive, and that was one of the things she loved about him—when he wanted to do something, he simply decided he was going to do it.

“It’s lovely,” she said.

There was a paddock just beyond the fence, and in it there two brown mares and a young foal with a splash of white across his side. The stud was no doubt in the stables, being cared for as a prized possession, but this small group seemed a happy little family. They wandered aimlessly and carefully, nibbling at the grass and occasionally looking up curiously at Edward and Angela.

Beyond that, the sun was setting, splashing the sky with the most extraordinary reds and oranges, turning to a purple and blue haze. The very highest of the stars were beginning to twinkle to life, and in the distance a full moon shone down, filling her with energy and hope.

“Goodness, the heavens are beautiful tonight,” she said, looking up at the sky and smiling.

“Aren’t they just,” Edward replied. “There is something magical about the sun’s setting and rising, don’t you think?”

“Most definitely,” she gushed, in awe of all that was around her. “And it’s a perfect end to a perfect day. I’m so happy it all worked out so well for Lydia. She’s had such a difficult time since my parents died. Now, she deserves a little happiness.”

“She does,” Edward agreed. “And Humphrey is a cracking fellow. I’m glad he found what he was looking for after everything my cousin did to him. He and Lydia are wonderful together.”

Angela groaned loudly. “Can we please not mention James Lancaster ever again? I’ve heard that name far too much for one lifetime.”

Edward chuckled “I think that’s a fair request. He has certainly

not made your life easy over the past year or so, has he?”

“He most definitely has not,” Angela said, widening her eyes at the truth of it. “I am glad he is out of our lives for good.”

“He’ll get his comeuppance, just you wait and see. His father has been extremely kind to him, considering the damage he has done to the Nordshire name, but he’ll cross the wrong person sooner or later, and then he’ll learn what true wrath is like.”

Angela frowned. “I don’t wish him any ill will,” she said after a moment. “I don’t like the way he behaves, but no one deserves to be treated badly, even wrong-doers. I hope he finds what he is looking for somewhere, or that he meets somebody who can convince him to become a better version of himself.”

Edward turned to her and grinned. “You impress me more and

more each time we talk, my darling Angela. That is such a kindhearted thing to say, when so many would be out for revenge.”

She shrugged and leant on the fence, looking out over the horses. “Revenge is as damaging for the doer as it is for the receiver,” she said. “It’s important we learn to live in peace.”

Edward sighed. “I did not bring you out here to talk about my cousin,” he said, joining her in resting his elbows against the fence. “There is so much good in the world, and he has been on our tongues for far too long.”

“Did you bring me out here to talk about something in particular?” she asked.

Angela froze again. Her heart rate had slowed after being out there, in the quiet and the calm, but now it picked up pace again.

She tried to swallow, but her mouth had dried, and she held her breath. She didn't know why, but she had a feeling that this moment was the one that would change the rest of her life and she tried to prepare for it as best she could.

How does one even prepare for such things?

Edward sighed, though it didn't sound genuine. It sounded to Angela as though he was pretending to be weary. She looked at him and cocked her head.

"I am to be a viscount, or at least acting Viscount of Brighton if the law permits. It's all very new and interesting. I guess one day though, I could be an earl," he said with another sigh.

"I guess you could," she said, frowning in confusion and turning

back to the colors blending across the sky.

“It’ll take a lot of effort, a lot of hard work,” he said.

“Um . . . I’m certain it will,” she said, still confused by the way this conversation was going. It was not at all what she was expecting . . . what she had been secretly hoping for. “But you are intelligent enough to be a successful and fair earl or viscount. Your uncle would not have chosen you for either title if he did not think you could do it. I am sure parliament will see reason and grant him his request.”

“That’s true,” he said, again with a sigh.

Angela turned and blinked at him, trying not to laugh at this act he was, for some strange reason, putting on. When he didn’t react, she turned back to the horses, silently asking them if *they* had any idea what was going on.

“There are some things I am going to need, though,” he said, still looking out over the field. “New suits, perhaps a new quill. Some friends, too, and someone who can help me in terms of business.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Angela said. “But it may be a while before you become an earl.”

“Of course,” Edward said with a chuckle. “The longer my uncle stays in this world, the better. But, well, when I perhaps *do* become an earl, I guess I’ll need a countess too, won’t I? Or I could settle for a viscountess perhaps?”

Angela nodded, her focus on the paddock, as the word settled into her mind. It was just another thing on his list, wasn’t it? A strange list, at that. She could feel his eyes on her, but she wasn’t sure why, and her own eyes darted back and forth uncertainly. But then it hit her, and she gasped.

A countess or viscountess!

She spun around in surprise, only to find that he had gotten down onto one knee beside her. She unintentionally let out a squeal of excitement, making Edward laugh. When he caught his breath, he smiled up at her, and she could see the love shining from his eyes.

This is it!

“I know this is not what you deserve,” he began with yet another sigh. “Not anywhere close. You deserve a much fancier proposal, something truly romantic.”

“Do I?” she asked, her voice a sigh on the air.

“You do. And you must know this wasn’t planned, either. I thought to wait . . . unfair to do this on your sister’s wedding day. But . . . but dancing with you this evening, Angela . . . I can’t wait any longer. I wish to marry you as soon as possible.”

“Do you?” she asked.

Her breaths were rapid, and every time she reached for a gulp of air, it was snatched away by her amazement and her love. Her mouth opened and closed then opened again.

“Angela Stanley, will you marry me?”

She squealed again, jumping up and down on the spot, and Edward laughed again.

“Is that . . . does that mean yes?” he asked through her cries of

happiness.

“Of course it does, silly!” she cried. “As if you thought any different!”

Without another thought, Angela threw herself into his arms, letting her body slide down until she, too, was kneeling on the floor. She pulled his body close into hers, her embrace strong and warm, and then she pulled back and let his lips touch hers, just as they had all those months earlier.

“Thank goodness,” Edward said, still laughing. “I was worried for a moment you were going to say no!”

“Me? Really Edward, you say the silliest things sometimes. I feel as if I’ve been waiting for you to ask since before I even met you!”

“We’re engaged, Angela! You’re my fiancée!” Edward said in a dazed yet happy tone.

He grinned at her once again, and she squealed with excitement. “I can’t believe it. We have a wedding to plan. Oh my goodness, Edward, we’re engaged to be married.”

“At long last,” he laughed, “yes.”

Angela straightened up then, remembering something, and she grimaced. “Oh, there’s something we need to do before that though.”

Edward cocked his head. “What’s that?” he asked.

“The most challenging part is still to come,” she said, shaking her head, though the worry in his eyes made her want to guffaw instead.

“What?” he urged, panic in his eyes. “What have I missed?”

She sighed again, in part to mock his earlier attempts at convincing her with his own sighs. “You still need to secure Lydia and Humphrey’s permission. As well as the Duke’s. These procedures must be proper, mind you.”

They looked at each other seriously for barely a second, but they were soon laughing and falling against one another. They both knew how easy it would be to secure that permission—both Lydia and Humphrey had been making hints about that very thing for weeks now. And William would wholeheartedly agree to the marriage.

“I guess there’s no time like the present,” he said.

“Now?” she asked, surprised he was so keen.

“Why not? The sooner we ask, the sooner we can make it official.”

Chapter 32

“They’re over there,” Angela said, nodding over to where Lydia and Humphrey were sitting. She spoke out of the corner of her mouth, her eyes still on her sister, as if they were on some secret mission.

Lydia and Humphrey were alone, deep in conversation but full of loving gazes while revelers danced and drank around them. They looked so incredibly happy, and Edward thought of when he and Angela would be able to share the same moment.

“Are you sure about this?” Angela asked, turning a worried glance on Edward. He wanted to reach over and kiss away her nerves.

“Very sure,” he replied. “And though I was uncertain earlier, now I’m convinced that this is the perfect time to do it. They will want to share in our love just as much as we want to share in theirs.”

The more he thought of it, in fact, the more convinced Edward was that he'd made the right decision. They were all so light and happy with the day's events. There couldn't have been a better time to propose. Lydia and Humphrey were coming together to make a family, and a union between Edward and Angela created an even firmer bond.

They would be happy for them, Edward was certain of that, and securing their permission would simply add to the celebratory nature of the day. The party waged on behind them, everyone ignorant to what was going on in the corner.

"All right," Angela said next to him. He sensed her take a deep, preparatory breath. "Let's go."

They began to walk over, but the closer they got to Lydia and Humphrey, the quicker their steps became, until they were laughing and chasing each other like children.

“There’s no need to rush,” Angela said with a giggle.

“I could say the same to you,” he laughed in reply.

“You’re almost running,” Lydia said, turning her surprised eyes on them. “Where are you going?”

Edward laughed again, realizing they’d been caught out in their silly game. “We’re coming to see you, of course,” he said.

“It’s nice to see we inspire so much eagerness,” Lydia said.

He wasn’t quite sure how to start. He knew what he wanted to ask, but felt he couldn’t just jump straight in there and ask, without any conversation to begin it.

“Are you having a lovely time?” he asked, though from the way her eyes shone, Edward already knew the answer to that.

“The best,” Lydia replied. “You’re looking rather happy too.” She looked from Angela to Edward with a questioning expression.

“Actually, where have you been?”

Edward glanced at Angela and noticed that she instantly blushed, yet again! He pushed his lips together to stop himself from laughing, wanting to show his future sister-in-law a more mature, sensible behavior. But laughter was bubbling from Lydia’s and Humphrey’s lips too, and he realized they were as heady as he.

“We’ve . . . er . . . we’ve been for a walk,” Angela said, looking at Edward for a little support.

“Yes, a walk,” he said.

“Nothing improper, I hope,” Humphrey teased. Angela narrowed her eyes at him.

“You cannot be serious,” she said.

“Of course he’s not serious, Angela dear,” Lydia said. “Were you in need of fresh air?”

“Actually, I had something I wanted to ask Angela,” Edward said.

“Oh,” Lydia said, feigning surprise. “I wonder what on earth that could be.”

Edward took a deep breath. While he was certain what their

answer would be, it didn't help the nerves that ran through him.

"I asked her to marry me," he said, the words coming out quickly in his anxiety. "And she said yes!"

"I said yes!" Angela squealed, unable to stop herself from jumping in.

Edward paused and looked at the newly married couple in the hopes they might answer him without him actually asking. But no such luck; they were going to torture him into saying the words.

"I am here now to formally ask you for permission to go ahead with the engagement," he said. He swallowed back his fear and held his breath as he watched their reaction.

"Goodness, well," Lydia said. She had a hand to her chest, and

she blinked rapidly. “That really does come as a surprise.”

Edward’s brow furrowed. He didn’t believe she could possibly be surprised, and yet she sounded so genuine.

“Especially surprising as you could not wait until one wedding is over before planning the next one,” Humphrey said, his voice tinged with annoyance.

Edward closed his eyes in regret. This was all going wrong; his first thought had been correct. He should have waited and given the newlyweds a chance to celebrate their own union before asking. Now, he had offended them.

“Did you not think we might like to celebrate our own marriage before asking us to celebrate another?”

“You’re right,” Edward said, desperately thinking of how to get out of this. “I’m sorry. I was just so eager and I guess I got carried away by the spirit of the day.”

“Oh Humphrey,” Lydia said, playfully slapping his arm. “Stop teasing the poor man. He’s believing every word you’re saying!”

“But it’s so much fun,” Humphrey said with a pout.

“You mean . . .” Edward looked from Lydia to Humphrey, wanting to laugh at his own foolishness.

Humphrey laughed and grabbed hold of Edward’s hand, giving it a firm shake. “She’s right. I’m teasing you, my friend. I’m delighted for you, and what a great time to announce it! Of course you have our permission. I don’t even need to consult my wife to know she agrees with me.”

“We’ve spoken about it often enough before this,” Lydia said.

Edward let out a sigh of relief and looked over at Angela, who looked equally grateful but with a flash of playful annoyance.

“Humphrey, you brute,” Angela said, looking at him furiously. “I believed you!”

Humphrey laughed again. “That was the point. If you cannot have a little fun on your wedding day, when can you? But I am sorry. You know I’m pleased for you.”

Lydia pulled Edward into a warm embrace and whispered into his ear. “You’re already part of my family, Edward,” she said. “But I cannot wait for you to be my brother by law as well as in heart.”

Edward took a step back, overwhelmed by the emotion of the moment. But when he looked at Angela, she was on the verge of squealing again, and the vision cut through the strength of his feeling, allowing him to laugh.

“Thank you,” he said, clearing his throat. “I really appreciate your kind words and I, too, am looking forward to the moment we can truly call ourselves family.”

“Not at all,” Lydia said. “I’m glad Angela has found a worthy husband.”

“I’m engaged!” There came the squeak, and together they all laughed.

“What’s going on?” William asked as he approached the group. “You’re all sounding very happy with yourselves.”

“You’re looking pretty happy yourself,” Humphrey said. “I take it you got your dance?”

“I got more than that,” William said, but his cheeks flushed and he looked away as he spoke. “I kissed her!”

“Oh, William!” Angela gushed and pulled him into an embrace. “My baby brother has had his first ever kiss.”

“No wonder you’re looking so pleased with yourself,” Edward said. “What a sweet thing to happen. It’s something you’ll remember for the rest of your life.”

“Congratulations, William,” Lydia said as she, also, embraced him. But then she wagged her finger in his face. “But you be careful with that poor girl’s reputation, William Stanley. Don’t you get

yourself carried away with all those new . . . feelings.”

William rolled his eyes, making everyone else laugh. “Yes, Lydia. I’m not stupid, you know.”

“I know you’re not,” she said firmly. “But that doesn’t mean your guardian can’t remind you now and then.”

“Leave the poor boy alone,” Humphrey said with a kindly laugh. “It’s a day for love, not tuition.”

“Exactly, Humphrey. I like you more and more by the minute,” William said. “But don’t you all agree that love is simply the best thing in the world?”

Lydia laughed. “It was only a kiss, William. And you’re still only fourteen, remember.”

“That doesn’t mean he can’t experience it, Lydia,” Angela said.

“It absolutely is the best thing in the world,” Edward agreed.

“And since you will soon officially become Duke of Dorset in a few years, I feel it’s only right to ask you as well.”

“Ask me what?” William asked. “What’s going on?”

“I would like to ask your permission to marry your sister, Angela,” he said.

“And what does Angela say about that? Are we sure she wants to?” William asked, turning to look at his sister before he burst out into laughter. “As if we didn’t all know already!”

“Well?” Lydia asked. “Don’t keep the poor man waiting for your answer, William.”

“Of course I give you my permission,” William said, smiling so broadly that it was obvious he was happy to have been asked. “I just have one request.”

“What’s that?” Angela asked.

“That you invite the Baron and his sister to the wedding. You never know; I might get another kiss!”

Epilogue

Four Months Later

Their wedding day had finally arrived, and though it had only been four months, to Angela it had felt like a lifetime of waiting. Now that she was being dressed by Lydia and Maria, she could feel herself shaking with nerves.

They were standing in front of the full-length looking glass, Maria on one side of her and Lydia on the other.

“You’re shaking like an autumn leaf,” Maria said with a chuckle.

“It’s just the same as the last time we were in this position,” Lydia said. “Do you remember?”

“Except I’m far more nervous this time,” Angela admitted.

“There’s no need to be nervous, though,” Maria said to her reflection. “Edward is marvelous—I know many of the society ladies are jealous.”

“They’ve got good reason to be,” Lydia giggled. “Handsome and eligible. What could be better?”

“He’s more than that,” Angela said, wistfully staring at herself. “He’s funny and intelligent too. I can talk to him about absolutely anything, and if he doesn’t understand, he’ll do whatever he needs to do to make himself understand. I feel safe when I’m with him, but not just safe from danger. I know that everything is going to be all right.”

“If there was any doubt before, we can be certain now,” Maria said. “You’ve been bitten by love!”

“And what a lovely day to celebrate that love,” Lydia said, smiling warmly at her reflection. “The sun is shining on this cold winter day, the birds are singing, and you, my dear sweet sister, look like an angel from the heavens.”

Angela grinned at herself. “It is a rather beautiful gown, isn’t it?”

“Made all the more beautiful by the bride wearing it,” Maria said.

Her gown was ivory in color and made of delicate silk. The skirt stopped just short of her toes, and around the high waistband, there was a shock of bright gold ribbon. Over the top, she wore a long flowing silk cloak in a pale gold color, the train of which spread out along the floor for two feet behind her.

Her hair had been carefully pinned and through it, golden ribbon and threads had been weaved, creating a headpiece that looked almost like a crown. And she would carry a bouquet of yellow and white flowers, carefully tied with twine.

“The carriage is waiting. Are you ready?” William asked, poking his head around the doorframe.

He had not been involved in the preparations, denouncing that as women’s work, but he would be walking his sister down the aisle, just as he had done for Lydia, in lieu of their father.

Angela took a deep breath, her nervousness making it judder through her. “As ready as I’ll ever be, I think.”

“This is the start of your life, Angela,” Lydia said, clutching hold of her arm. “And what a wonderful life that is going to be!”

The wedding was to be a far grander affair than that of Lydia and Humphrey. They were to be married in the cathedral, where hundreds of guests would be in attendance. Later, they would celebrate at Nordshire Manor, an enclosed garden party put on and paid for by the Earl himself as a thank you to Edward for all he had done for their family.

They had invited James Lancaster, as well as his mother Eugenia, but while the latter had politely declined, citing health reasons, they had not heard from the former since he left the city. The Earl himself was not perturbed, though, and was determined to celebrate his nephew's marriage in a fitting way.

Angela could imagine Eugenia, huddled in her rooms as they celebrated on the grounds below, and she couldn't help but feel sorry for her. She had made some terrible mistakes in her life, but if only she would admit it, she would be able to enjoy the warmth and love of family life. Alas, there is so much that Angela did not understand

about the woman, and she feared she never would.

When they opened the cathedral doors and stepped in, Angela gasped. Over a hundred heads turned to look at them, and in her sudden panic, she froze.

“Are you all right?” Lydia whispered.

“There are so many people here,” she replied, her voice shaking.

“And they’re all here to see you and Edward,” Maria reminded her.

“We’re going to take our seats now,” Lydia said. “But you have William. Hold onto him if you need to.”

Angela nodded as her sister and best friend scampered down the aisle to find their respective partners.

“Look,” William whispered, pointing down to the far end of the aisle. “There’s Edward. Just focus on him. He’s the reason you’re here, after all.”

Angela swallowed and nodded, but at first, she didn’t see her husband-to-be. He was facing the altar, his hands clasped in front of him, but as the first chords on the organ were played, he turned around.

That’s when she saw him, and she smiled, her nerves instantly put at ease, her heart calmed. William was right. He was the reason she was there, and nothing else mattered. She held onto his bright green gaze as they walked slowly between the rows of guests.

“I never thought it was possible for you to look even more beautiful, but it appears I was wrong,” Edward said when she drew up beside him.

“I must say you’re looking rather handsome yourself,” she said.

The ceremony was simple but perfect, the words they spoke so meaningful to each of them. As Angela recited her vows, she remembered Lydia saying the very same words, but thought about how they held such different meaning for each bride and for each groom.

Once they had declared themselves to one another and exchanged simple bands of gold, they moved onto the vestry, where Humphrey and the Earl of Nordshire witnessed the signing of the register. When the priest handed Angela her copy of it, she held it up in the air and let out a squeal of excitement.

“And now,” the Earl said, beaming proudly at the newly married couple, “it’s time to celebrate!”

Edward and Angela traveled to the house in a coach of their own, one that had been carefully decorated with bright ribbons and flowers. As they moved through the streets, everyone turned to look at the wedding party with smiles, waves, and congratulations.

“It’s as if everyone is celebrating with us,” Angela said, looking out of the window in amazement.

“A wedding raises everyone’s spirits,” Edward said. “Even for those who are not involved.”

“I feel we’re a prince and princess in some fairy tale,” she giggled.

He looked at her confused. "But that's exactly what we are, didn't you know? Prince Edward and Princess Angela, off on their next adventure."

Angela laughed again. "I like the sound of that," she said.

Edward smiled at her. "You don't have to sit so far away. Are you not cold?" he said, a single eyebrow raised.

Angela pressed her lips together, her eyes wide, but she shuffled along the bench until she was right next to him. He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to his chest, where she breathed in his rich, earthy scent. He managed to wrap the thick shawl around them both and they both sighed in content. He put his lips to the top of her head and kissed it.

"The vows we said were not ample enough to explain how I truly

feel about you, Angela. I love you so very much.”

“And I love you,” she said, her eyes closed as she soaked in the feeling of being in his arms at long last. And now that they were married, she could return there time and time again.

By the time they had made their way around town, the garden party at Nordshire Manor was in full swing. The quartet had begun to play and guests were dancing and drinking and picking at the grand buffet Mason had provided.

There were footmen with trays of champagne, an opera singer hired for a performance later on, and dancers throughout. There was even a rumored firework display that would happen when the sky turned dark. Edward’s uncle spared no expense for this wedding celebration.

The butler rang a bell and everyone turned to look at the newlyweds, who grinned at the crowd.

Angela, grasping hold of Edward's arm, grinned up at him, and then they took their first steps into the rest of their lives.

* * *

"Ask him," Edward urged. "He will be pleased, I am certain of it."

They had been married for all of two hours, and they'd shared their first breakfast together, when Angela had begun thinking of dancing.

"But won't he think me odd?"

“He most definitely will not think you odd. He’ll be overjoyed.”

“All right,” Angela said. She nodded her agreement and then walked over to the Earl.

“Excuse me, my lord,” she said.

He turned and laughed, a true and happy laugh from the center of his being. “My dear girl, you are married to my nephew. I think you can call me Mason now, don’t you?”

“Mason, thank you,” she said, smiling shyly. “I actually have a request.”

“Oh, yes?” He cocked his head, curious about what her request

could possibly be.

“Yes,” she said with a soft smile. “I wish to have a dance with you.”

Mason paused for a moment, and Angela wasn't sure she had done the right thing. But then his face broke into a wide and delighted smile, his eyes shining with gratitude and love.

“It would be my pleasure, young lady.”

He held his arm out so she could entwine hers with his, and he led her onto the paved area they were using for dancing. As they got there, Angela looked across and saw that Edward and Lydia had joined them, too.

As they danced, Angela could feel everyone's eyes on her, but she

didn't mind it. She felt proud to be dancing with her husband's uncle, while her husband danced with her sister. She felt proud to be a married woman, and to such a wonderful man too.

“Edward expresses with joy how much you have been like a father to him,” she said.

Mason's eyes softened and he looked away, obviously saddened. “It's a dreadful shame my brother is not here to witness his son's marriage. He would be so dreadfully proud.”

Angela nodded in agreement as they twirled in their dance. “I wish I had met him too. His son has grown into a decent man. But you also had a hand in that.”

“I'm glad you've found each other,” Mason said as they danced. “You make Edward happier than I have ever seen him, and he

deserves some happiness in his life, after all that has happened.”

“He makes me equally happy,” Angela replied.

“Good,” Mason replied. “And hopefully, you’ll have a little heir of your ownsoon.”

Angela blushed. “We can only hope.”

Later, after all the dancing and drinking and merriment, it was time for them to go. They were taking a wedding trip to the seaside, and Angela could barely contain herself.

“Isn’t it wonderful to be going away?”

“It’s wonderful to be going away with you,” Edward corrected.

She slapped his arm playfully. “You don’t have to turn everything into a romanticism, you know.”

“But I like to,” Edward said with a shrug. “After all, you’re my wife now. Doesn’t that sound good? I have a wife!”

“And I have a husband! After just one season, I found my happily ever after.”

“You didn’t find it, darling. Fate brought us together.”

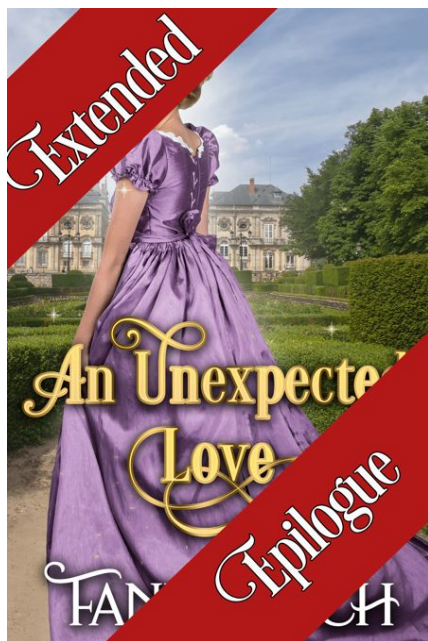
“And so I shall always be thankful for fate.”

Extended Epilogue

I am humbled you read my novel “*An Unexpected Love*” till the end!

Are you aching to know what happens to our lovebirds?

Click on the image or the link below to connect to a more personal level and as a BONUS, I will send you the Extended Epilogue of this Book!



Or click [Here](#)

If you enjoyed the story, I would love to read your thoughts about it in a review! Go to Amazon to post your amazing review!

Training Lord Somerset - Preview

Prologue

Two Years Previously

Rain lashed heavily against the roof of the coach and the wind buffeted it, causing it to jerk and shake, but they charged on. The coachman yelled at the horses over the rumble of the storm, their hooves kicking up water as they pulled the rickety wheels across the cobbled roads.

Still, inside the coach, the mood was merry and the air filled with love and laughter. Twenty-year-old Lydia and her parents were on their way home after visiting her cousins, where they'd had simply the best time.

"And Cordelia claiming she will never marry, for she needs no man!" Lydia's mother—the Duchess of Dorset—wiped a tear of laughter away from her cheek, sighing as she caught her breath. "I've never seen that brother of mine look so horrified in all my life."

"No, I don't think Uncle Matthew found it quite so amusing,"

Lydia said, although she, too, could barely stop the giggles from coming. “Although I suspect that’s why she said it at all; she’s such a scamp when it comes to such things, always teasing.”

“She will be the death of him,” the Duke, Lydia’s father said, shaking his head. “I fear his heart will give out long before she has a chance to admit her folly.”

“Nonsense,” the Duchess replied. “Matthew is made of tougher stuff than that. And he knows as well as we do what his—oh!”

Lydia cried out at the same time as her mother, a hand flying to the wall of the coach in order to steady herself.

“What was that?” she cried, wide-eyed.

“My apologies,” Andrew, the coachman, called over his shoulder, practically screaming to be heard over the racket of the storm. He tried to keep the gaiety in his voice, but Lydia detected a hint of concern. It was the storm—it had to be. “Road’s a bit uneven, that’s all, and what with this weather... Will try and keep her straight

enough. Not far to go, now.”

Laughter echoed through the interior once again, the Duchess chuckling at her fear, but this time it was tinged with unease. Lydia noticed that her mother still clutched to the seat, the color in her cheeks having paled a shade, even as she tried to feign amusement.

“And then Cordelia proclaimed that she could do a job as good as any man!” Lydia said, eyes sparkling. “And that she would flourish as a duke or an earl and positively flounder as a duchess or a countess.”

She looked at her parents and grinned, trying fruitlessly to return the conversation to the jollity of moments before. No luck. The mood had shifted and now the harsh weather and the roughness of the ride seemed to penetrate the very coach itself.

“Well, it’s a good thing she won’t have to face such hardships,” the Duke said with a sigh. “While I don’t doubt some women are perfectly capable, it’s rather unfair to put members of the fairer sex under such pressure, don’t you agree, darling?”

“Why ye—”

But the Duchess’ words were cut off by a loud bang and a sharp judder. Something had gone wrong, terribly wrong, and Lydia gasped. She spun around to look out of the window, her heart racing. They weren’t on the road anymore.

The Duchess instinctively put an arm out in front of Lydia as if to protect her. The coach shuddered and rocked, and the coachman yelled out frightfully.

“What’s happening?” Lydia called, her voice high with terror. But Andrew didn’t answer her; he was too consumed in trying to calm the horses.

“Whoa, there. Whoa!”

Lydia looked around in a blind panic, and she saw the fear written across both her parents’ faces, too. Even over the sporadic cracks of thunder and the pelting rain, she could hear the whinnying of the horses as they pulled and wrenched themselves apart, as fearful

and uneasy as she.

“Whoa, all right, easy,” Andrew cried, desperately trying to regain control, but the sheer and utter terror that ran through his voice told Lydia he was failing.

Everything seemed to slow, and then there was only silence. Lydia could see her mother shouting something at her, her father gesticulating wildly, but none of it was getting through. None of it made sense.

All she could hear was the thudding of her own heart, the rushing of her own blood. She turned to watch out of the window, her chest heaving.

“The cliff,” she cried, turning to her mother and then back again, though she could not hear her own words. “It’s fast approaching.”

The coach lurched again, and they were off the cliff edge, flying through the air, their speed keeping them upright. Lydia yelled as her mother threw herself across her lap and yanked at the latch on the

door, throwing it open and making the coach swerve and jump in the air.

It snapped back against the wall of the coach, slamming against it and then falling away. They were in the air, heading straight ahead, but falling as they went.

It all came flooding back then, in one big whoosh of noise and chaos. Below them, Lydia could hear the roar of the sea, rushing to them. She could hear the screams of the horses, of the coachman, of herself.

Time slowed, and Lydia took in everything, her senses on high alert.

“Come on, come on,” the Duke growled as he scrambled at the latch on the other door, but it was stuck firm. He slammed a fist against it and again, the coach juddered in the air. “Damn you!”

If they did nothing, soon they would smash into the rockface ahead of them. Soon, they were going to die.

Lydia looked at her mother. The fear had gone from the Duchess' eyes, to be replaced by a serene calm, an acceptance of what was happening. She put a hand against Lydia's chest as they hung, seemingly still, in the air.

Then she spoke, and her soft words echoed ghostly over the deafening noise. They were words Lydia would hear in her dreams for the rest of her life.

“Look after Angela and William. We love you all dearly, and we always will.”

With that, she felt a hard push against her chest and then she was falling, falling, no longer in the coach but in the cold air, her gown billowing out around her, the fear snatching at her scream and leaving her silent as she watched the coach above her.

Is this it? Is this how I die?

She hit the water with a thud, and then plunged into its depths,

the bitter icy cold stealing her breath. She opened her mouth to gulp in the air, but all she got was a mouthful of salty, grimy water.

She tried to cough, to choke it away, but only succeeded in inhaling more water. She tried again, her panic making her gasp and her gasp making her take in more of the filthy water. Finally, she gave up.

She opened her eyes and let the water take her. It was too surreal, a nightmare she couldn't wake up from, and as the last wisps of breath left her body, she found she didn't even want to wake up.

Around her, bits of broken wheel, a strip of rope, the personal effects of her parents, floated peacefully through the water, air bubbles running up from them where they had landed, the noise and the turmoil and the terror forgotten already.

Lydia Stanley closed her eyes, lay back into the water, and drifted off into the darkness.

It didn't feel how she fancied death would feel. The pulling, the

tugging, the sudden rushing air—none of it was how she thought it would be, on the occasions she let herself imagine.

She could hear the shouts in the distance, calling to her, begging her, and Lydia turned to them, trying to understand, trying to hear.

“Lady Lydia! Lady Lydia!”

That’s when the pain hit her, the blistering agony across her left cheek, the heavy ache in her arms, and she was flung back into her body, back to reality. She rolled over onto her side and spluttered, coughing up sea water and watching it puddle on the sand.

“Atta girl,” she heard someone say—a man, and one she knew, though couldn’t place. “Get it all up now.”

She opened her eyes to a bleary scene: the shore—a mix of sand and stone; Andrew—falling back against a rock, spent and bleeding from several wounds; the dark shadow in the distance that she refused to let herself see. *Not yet.*

“What . . .” She tried to speak but was overtaken yet again by racking coughs. She bent double, leaning heavily on her elbow as she retched.

“We fell into the sea,” Andrew explained, his voice heavy with exhaustion and weariness. “Away from the . . .” He indicated vaguely in the direction of the dark shadow, of what she had been avoiding looking at. “That’s what saved us both.”

She nodded mutely, gathered her strength and her will, then forced herself to turn and look at the wreckage.

A whimper spilled unbidden from her lips. The coach had crashed against the rocks, smashing into a thousand pieces. And there, just in view, were two very still dark figures, bent and contorted around the jagged rock surface.

“No, m’lady,” Andrew cried with a renewed energy. “Don’t look.”

But it was too late. The image was seared into her mind, and it would stay there for the rest of her life.

“You saved my life,” she said, the numbness mercifully flooding her body as she turned back to look at him. “You pulled me from the water.”

“I only did what anyone would have done,” he said with a shrug. His legs were splayed out in front of him, his shoulders sagging. “And if she hadn’t pushed you out . . .”

“Mother.” Lydia breathed the word rather than said it, her eyes closed against the pain. But it wasn’t enough, the agony and the anguish found a way through.

The tears began to fall, burning against the damaged flesh on her face, but she didn’t care. If it burned enough, perhaps it would drown out the pain she felt inside.

Andrew shuffled along the ground until he sat next to her, and he put his arm around her, whispering into her ear.

“I know, lass. I know. But we’ve got to hold it together now.

We've got to keep going. You need to think of Lady Angela and Lord William, now."

Of course. The realization dawned on her. She would be the head of their household now. She would have to look after her sister, barely sixteen, and William, only just twelve. She would have what her cousin Cordelia claimed to have wanted—the duties of a duke, at least until her brother came of age. And all because . . .

She glanced once again at the wreckage, unable to stop herself, and let out a loud and ugly sob. She truly didn't know if she had the strength to carry on.

Chapter 1

Humphrey peered out of the window as the coach pulled up in front of the house—his house, or soon to be, if his father had his way.

Somerset Hall.

It was an imposing building. The gray brick was reminiscent of a castle's coldness, even against the brightness of the drapes and the pretty flowerbeds planted in an attempt to make the place look cozy. There were eighteen large windows on the front of the house alone, and no doubt the same number at the back.

The smooth roof was interrupted by regular dormer windows. To Humphrey, they had always looked like eyes, staring down at him, seeing into his very soul, his thoughts and his feelings. He shook his head of the fancy—how his father would disapprove if he knew of his son's wild imagination.

Humphrey felt the knot of tension tighten in his stomach, twisting and turning and churning. He had no desire to become the Earl of Somerset, or to live here. He only wanted to be free and to

travel, to live his life in the way *he* chose, not anyone else.

“Is everything all right, my lord?” the coachman asked, pulling open the door and gazing in at Humphrey.

“What? Oh, yes, quite all right. Why?”

“It’s just we’ve been stopped for ten minutes now, my lord, and you haven’t got out yet. Don’t mean to speak out of turn, but the horses could do with walking cool.”

“What?” he repeated, feeling lost at the coachman’s words. And then he understood and he stuttered his apologies. “Oh, yes, of course, yes. I’m sorry. I . . .”

He trailed off and then clambered awkwardly out of the coach. He stood on the gravel path, just at the bottom of the four stone steps leading up to the double oak doors, as the coach trundled away behind him. He thought, briefly, how apt it was, that he was there, left to his fate and with no hope of escape.

“If only I were ready,” he muttered under his breath.

Humphrey Berkeley, second son of the Duke of Wiltshire, had recently turned twenty-eight years old, and he was soon to become the Earl of Somerset. He stood tall amongst his peers, with hair the color of chestnuts, curls of it peeking out from under the brim of his hat.

His eyes, a somewhat darker shade of brown, sparkled with life and energy, telling tales of his need for adventure, and his reluctance to settle into a life in England. It was not that he disliked England—far from it—but rather, his desire to see the world overrode any love he felt for his home country.

He’d had a good run, though. He lost his mother at the tender age of ten, and that had been tragic, of course, but he had since been granted the opportunity to discover himself. As a second son, he was not put under the same pressures as his elder brother, and he’d spent years traveling the world instead of learning how to run an estate.

Perhaps, he thought, if I’d spent a little more time learning then I wouldn’t be so filled with dread now.

“There you are!”

Pulled out of his reverie, Humphrey looked up at the door, mouth hanging open and blinking in surprise. His father had pulled it open in annoyance.

Typical Father.

“You were supposed to be here half an hour ago,” the Duke said with a scowl.

“Yes, I’m sorry about that, we got held up at—”

“Well, nothing can be done about that now. Don’t just stand there like a fool, boy. Come on in. It is *your* home, after all. Or at least, it will be very shortly.”

Boy. Humphrey gaped. It didn’t matter how old he was, his father always knew how to make him feel like a five-year-old. The Duke chuckled at his reaction and turned on his heels, marching

across the marble floor of the entrance hall, expecting Humphrey to follow.

Humphrey took a deep breath to prepare himself, then trotted up the steps and followed loyally. He may never see himself as an earl, but he knew it was good of his father to pass the title on to him.

He wanted to make the Duke proud for once, even if he had no idea how to do the job that was asked of him.

“Most of the rooms are still locked up,” the Duke said over his shoulder, the heels of his shoes clipping neatly on the floor as Humphrey scampered to keep up. “The maids I sent over have done the basics, but when your own staff arrive, they’ll need to give the place a thorough going over.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said, looking around him, part in awe, part in fear.

They walked past the carpeted staircase and the rich mahogany bannister that lined it. They ignored the doors to their left and right—

each delicately carved with different hunting scenes. They passed the portraits of long-dead family members, all seeming to peer down at Humphrey in eager anticipation—and heavy expectation.

They headed straight for the back of the house, where Humphrey knew the study to be. As a family, they had spent time at Somerset Hall during the summer months, enjoying the vast gardens and the rooms so filled with natural light. Though all that had stopped when the Duchess died, Humphrey remembered the building well—both the good parts and the bad.

“Brandy?” the Duke asked, barging into the study and going straight to the cabinet. He pulled out two crystal tumblers and filled them halfway, without even waiting for a reply. When he turned, he thrust one at Humphrey with a wide grin.

“I must say,” he said, taking his son in, “you look positively burnt.”

“Burnt?” Humphrey held the glass in both hands and blinked rapidly.

“Yes. Burnt. Blackened. Overcooked. Like the maid has left the pig on the spit for too long.”

“Pig on the . . .”

Humphrey frowned and looked down at himself. He supposed his years of travel had darkened his skin somewhat but burnt and blackened seemed a little far-fetched. He preferred to think of *caramel* as being a closer description, or perhaps *bronze*.

“Exactly!” The Duke, still grinning, raised his glass as though in a toast, entirely oblivious to the fact that he had insulted his son. “In fact, your tan is a great indicator that you’ve had enough adventure for a lifetime—and not a moment too soon, neither. Once you’ve resettled, you’ll take on the Earldom.”

“So you explained in your letters,” Humphrey said, trying to force his frown away. He couldn’t let his father know his concerns.

“Indeed. Naturally, you’ll have the opportunity to ease yourself

back into English life, but as soon as you're ready—and don't let that be too long, Humphrey—I shall pass you the title. Your brother may inherit the Dukedom only after my death, but there is no reason for me not to pass on my secondary title as an earl to you now."

The Duke looked eagerly at Humphrey who, in turn, forced an encouraging smile to his lips. His father looked positively ecstatic about the idea, and Humphrey was loath to ruin it for him.

But, as soon as I've resettled . . .

He didn't want to resettle, and he didn't like the thought that his adventures were over. He wanted to return to India—his home for the last six months. He wanted to explore Africa. He wanted to discover more of the world than he already had. England had nothing to offer him but boredom, pressure, and work.

"Sit down, then," the Duke said, looking at Humphrey as though he was quite mad. "We're not going to do this standing up, are we?"

"Yes," Humphrey replied, then shook his head. "I mean, no, I'll

sit down.”

The Duke sat in what would soon be Humphrey’s seat, while Humphrey took the guest chair, feeling as childlike and tongue-tied as ever.

“It’s about time someone was in charge of this place again,” the Duke said, leaning back in his chair and crossing one leg over the other, letting his ankle rest on his knee.

“Yes,” Humphrey said again.

He was finding it difficult to speak, and he knew he had his nerves to thank for that. He wondered how it was possible for a man to be so open and eloquent in one country, only to turn into a gibbering wreck whenever he returned home. No wonder his brother thought him entirely incapable.

I am incapable when it comes to all this.

“You’ll have to employ your own staff, as I have already said. I

might be able to spare a maid or two, perhaps a footman, just to get you going. And you already have your valet, of course.”

“Of course,” Humphrey replied, smiling weakly.

“I advise you to visit all your tenants when you take the title—introduce yourself and whatnot. It’s always good to be approachable and friendly, and they’ll ultimately thank you for it by paying their rent on time and looking after the properties. That’s what we care about, after all.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said, his heart racing at the thought. How could he possibly do this? He took a large gulp of his brandy then sucked in the air to cool the burn in his throat.

“And then there’s the matter of the new lands to the east. This estate bought the land, so this estate is, obviously, responsible for its upkeep.”

“To the east? You mean the Duke of Dorset’s land?”

“Oh, of course!” the Duke sang, his smile still wide. “Given you were on your travels, you won’t have heard the news.”

“Old Dorset is not experiencing financial troubles, is he?”

Humphrey asked, his interest piqued now.

“Goodness no, nothing like that,” the Duke said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Or at least, not in the way you think. No. He’s dead.”

Humphrey almost spat his brandy across the desk. His father always did have such a matter-of-fact way of putting things. He swallowed, trying to regain his composure.

“Dead?” Humphrey repeated.

“Yes, terrible tragedy, it was. He and that beautiful wife of his died in an awful coach accident. Rumor has it that the lines tethering the horses snapped through wear, and they went flying off the cliff edge. I would have blamed the blasted coachman if it were up to me, but the family are apparently still close to him.”

Humphrey didn't quite know what to say. He hadn't really known the Duke or the Duchess, but he was acquainted with the eldest of their children—Lydia, if he recalled correctly.

“Indeed,” the Duke continued as though Humphrey had given some sort of answer. “The daughter is running things now, until young Lord William comes of age, and I must say, she's not doing too bad a job at all. Early on, she sold a fair chunk of their land to finance them while she learned the ropes, as they say, but now the Duchy seems to be running quite smoothly. And we—or rather, the Somerset Estate—made a purchase.”

“Not the eldest daughter?” Humphrey asked with a frown.

“Of course, the eldest daughter. Do keep up, Humphrey. Really, I'm beginning to wonder whether all that travel has addled your brain.”

“No, it's just that I wasn't expecting it to be *her*, that's all.”

“Because she’s a woman?” the Duke tutted. “Highly unusual, I know, but not all ladies are as daft as that sister of yours. Your mother was as clever as they come.”

“I know,” Humphrey said with a sigh. “Of course not.”

He was not averse to admitting a woman may know her way around business. And yet, whenever he thought back to the Lydia Stanley he had met, he remembered a vapid, silly thing who cared only for beauty. She lacked in both personality and intelligence, resting on the laurels of a pretty face. He couldn’t pair the memories of her with the woman his father now described.

“Very well,” the Duke said happily. “Now that’s sorted, I’ll let you settle in, reacquaint yourself with the house.”

Humphrey looked up at his father in alarm. *Does he mean for me to stay here?*

“Don’t look so horrified, boy,” he said, blinking down at his son. “All will be well. I suggest that, when you have the time, you

familiarize yourself with the ledgers and check through the correspondence.”

“Yes, Father.”

The Duke got up from his seat and strode to the door. He stopped with his hand on the brass knob and turned back. “Oh, and do come and visit us soon at Wiltshire Manor. I know your sister in particular would dearly love to see you.”

Then he was gone, and Humphrey sat back in his chair, breathing a sigh of relief.

He ignored his father’s advice, studiously avoiding ledgers and letters. He couldn’t face all that, not yet. Instead, he wandered around the corridors, poking his head into this room and that.

Most of the furniture had been covered in dust sheets, and he could see immediately how much work there would be for the maids. He would have to sort that soon, he supposed—employing staff.

He had no idea how he would approach the task ahead of him, no idea if he could even do it. He didn't have the first clue on how to run an Earldom, and he wasn't entirely convinced he knew how to stay in the same place for so long. He was so used to wandering the world's passageways that those in the house felt stifling.

"Is there anybody home?"

Humphrey stopped his walking and tilted his head at the voice. Then he laughed and ran to the corridor, leaning heavily over the railing and looking down. There, a face tilted up to greet him. It was his oldest friend, James Lancaster, the Viscount Brighton and heir to the Earl of Nordshire.

"James!" Humphrey ran down the stairs and threw his hand out. James took it with a slap and shook vigorously, claspng Humphrey's hand in two of his own.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Wandering Tom returned. I'd heard a rumor you were in town and I just had to come see for myself."

“The one and only, in the flesh.” Humphrey laughed, stepping back and opening his arms to put himself on display. “Have you missed me?”

“Terribly so,” James said dramatically then looked around him with a nod of approval. “Nice place.”

“Hmm, well. It’s nice, yes, but I’m not sure about all that comes with it.”

“Ah, yes, the dreaded title,” he said, still looking around. “I suppose we’ll all have to face our fear of that one eventually.”

“Indeed. How are you, anyhow?”

“Parched,” James said, turning his smile on Humphrey. “I’m assuming you’ve filled the decanters already? It would certainly be first on *my* list.”

Humphrey chuckled. “Actually, Father saw to it before my arrival. Come, we’ll take a brandy or two in the study, and you can

tell me all about what you've been up to.”

“Because I’m the one who has been off on exciting adventures, yes,” James said dryly.

He was a handsome man of twenty-seven, with hair the color of sand and eyes that glimmered like emeralds. He was a tall fellow and he held himself proud, always exuding confidence and suave sophistication.

He was something of a ladies’ man, knowing how to win a woman over but rarely keeping her on side for long—much to his father’s chagrin. Thanks to his upbringing, he wanted for nothing and knew he never would, and that brought out something of a cad in him.

Still, he was an affectionate man, when it came to Humphrey, and they had been friends for so long that Humphrey knew it could never be anything but that. James was also in line for an Earldom and he was as reluctant as Humphrey.

“Your father still hasn’t passed it on, then? Your title?”

Humphrey asked over his shoulder as he poured the brandy. James had settled himself into the armchair.

“Goodness, no,” he said with a snort of humor. “And I have even less interest in it now than I did before you left.”

“Shame,” Humphrey said, handing him his drink.

“It’s not a shame. I’m still too busy basking in being a free man to worry about the estate and all that comes with it.”

James snorted again, this time with an ounce of outrage mixed in. Humphrey was disappointed. Although he knew his friend wished for anything but an Earldom, he had hoped James would be someone he could turn to for advice in the coming months.

Lord knows I need someone.

“Don’t look so worried,” James said, and Humphrey started at the idea that he could be so easily read. “I mean, how hard could it

possibly be?”

“That’s a good question,” Humphrey replied, staring down at the reflection of the crystal on the surface of the brandy.

“Right, enough of this,” James said, knocking back his brandy and slamming the glass down on the side table with considerable force. “Let’s go out.”

“Out?” Humphrey asked, looking up at James as he leapt to his feet.

“You promised to introduce me to your sailor friend, remember? Seems now is as good a time as any, and it might help pull you out of your doldrums.”

“So I did,” Humphrey said, gulping down the last of his own brandy. “And good news—there’s a tavern right on the dockside.”

Chapter 2

“You see, the . . . the . . . the thing is, Lady Lydia, as much as I admire what you are doing here for . . . for your family, I’m not sure . . . I mean, what I’m trying to say is that I could never take you away from your family, and yet I could never imagine myself living this far south.”

Lydia sighed, letting Lord Henry Twinkle, the latest in a long line of unsuitable suitors, talk himself half to death even though she wasn’t truly listening. He hadn’t even come fully into the study, preferring to stand in the doorway and make his excuses. She sat on the high stool, her back ramrod straight and her hands curled together in her lap, gazing through the gauzing muslin covering the window.

She couldn’t bring herself to look at him, to meet his gaze. His sniveling irritated her at best, even though she had known this was coming—the stuttering excuses, the pleading to be released by her, as if she was some sort of cage he needed to escape from.

Lydia couldn’t remember how many suitors had, in the last year, stood in the same place as Henry Twinkle currently stood, making the

same justifications he was making. They were never cruel, always stating some version of *it's not you, it's me*, and they were often so flustered that Lydia found herself feeling almost sorry for them.

But no. She knew the real reason, deep down. Their excuses were just that, and Henry Twinkle was no exception. Nobody wanted to be with her because of her disfigurement—and she couldn't blame them for that.

"The thing is, Lady Lydia," Henry said, "I'm a man of the north and I know how much you love your home here."

"Of course," she replied, forcing herself to sound bored, even if she was incensed inside.

At twenty-two years of age, Lydia Stanley's life was entirely different from how she had ever imagined it would be. She was a tall, slim girl with hair so blonde it was almost white, and her skin had a porcelain-like quality to it. Her lips were a perfect pink, shaped like the most delicate of rosebuds, but it was her eyes that were the most striking. While every other part of her face was pale and subtle, her

eyes were a shock of bright blue, ocean rich and full of life.

Her beauty had always been the thing she prided herself most on, so much so that she had more or less forgotten to embrace other parts of herself—intelligence and wit and humor seemed so unimportant when pitched against her looks.

And yet all that had changed when, two years ago, she had been involved in a coach accident with her parents. The scar that ran from her jaw all the way to her hairline had become silvery white, surrounded by a deep pink that never seemed to fade. It shimmered in the light, and when she smiled, it seemed to flash across the room, marring her otherwise perfect visage.

Her beauty had been ripped from her that day, as had her youth and her happiness. She'd had to learn quickly, taking over the Duke's duties until her brother came of age, and learn she did.

It was then that Lydia began to embrace those characteristics she had buried so deep. She turned from a vacuous vessel of beauty to a fierce young woman of great intelligence. She became a force to be

reckoned with in their community, a proud and strong herald of their Duchy, and she had learned to be suspicious of men's motives.

She did not hide from who she had become, nor was she ashamed of her scars. Rather, she did everything she could to show off the damage on her cheek, and where once, her eyes had struck people with awe, now their strength struck them with fear.

“You do understand, don't you, Lady Lydia?” Henry asked, looking at her hopefully.

“I understand,” she said. She knew exactly what he was thinking, and did the thing that would prove it.

She turned and smiled at him, feeling the pull of her damaged flesh as it tightened across her cheek. She kept her smiles for certain occasions only, knowing that this made her scar all the more pronounced. A smile like this, for Lydia, was no longer a sweet thing, but a threat or a warning. It was not a smile of happiness or warmth, but a reminder of what and who she was.

Henry's gaze flickered to her cheek and then back to her eyes, a look of panic running through him, and he visibly gulped. Lydia scoffed quietly, shaking her head. She was right.

“Yes, Lord Henry, I understand perfectly well.”

You have decided I am more repulsive than profitable.

“Well, that . . . that's good,” he said, throwing her a weak smile.

“Good day to you, then.”

“Good day, and please do not darken my doorstep again.” Lydia turned her full glare upon him, her smile faded but her eyes full of fire. “If you are not man enough to admit the truth about what you fear, you are not man enough to be welcomed into this house.”

“But . . . I . . .”

“Good day, Lord Henry,” she repeated, firmer this time, widening her eyes and daring him to reply.

He merely nodded, then turned on his heels and scampered from the room like a frightened mouse.

Lydia watched him go with a clenched jaw, then slipped down from her stool and slammed the door closed in frustration. She stared at the wood for a long moment, her chest heaving with rapid, angry breaths.

She had so much to offer a marriage. Admittedly, beauty was no longer a factor, but there were so many ways she could enrich someone's life—both physically and emotionally.

And so many ways someone could enrich my life, too.

She leant against the door, her brow heavily furrowed, and sighed deeply. How she missed being the silly young girl who dreamed of nothing but love and romance. Her life had become a heavy burden she struggled to shoulder alone.

To have someone to share it, to enjoy it with, and perhaps, one day .

No! She couldn't allow herself to think like that. Love, as it turned out, was not for her, no matter how much she had imagined it as a child. No, she had a duty, and she would do as her mother had asked on that fateful day. She would look after her brother and sister.

Lydia wandered over to her desk and began, quite without thinking, rifling through papers and letters, trying to find something to take her mind off everything. That's when the door opened and in sauntered her sister.

"Lord Henry looked as though he were in quite a hurry," Angela said in her usual bright manner. "Did he have somewhere important to be?"

"He's probably off to see some pretty slip of a thing," Lydia muttered to herself, not raising her eyes from the papers in front of her.

"Whatever do you mean?" Angela asked, approaching the desk.

“I mean,” Lydia said, looking up at Angela, “that he is yet another man unable to handle my hideousness.”

“You are *not* hideous,” Angela replied. “You are very beautiful, and you know it.”

There was a measure of weariness in her tone. She often repeated those words, even while Lydia knew the truth. Lydia pushed her lips together to stop herself from barking out with harsh laughter. Her poor, dear sister had no idea how the real world worked, but she was grateful, at least, that she tried.

“It matters not, anyhow,” Lydia said, lowering herself into the wooden chair. “I have long given up on my own prospects, but you, my dearest sister, have so much yet to come.”

“Oh, don’t be like that, please, Lydia,” Angela whined, but Lydia only looked up at her and grinned.

“When the season starts next week, you’ll have your debut—and about time, too. You’re eighteen now, Angela. It’s time we found you

a good match.”

Angela shrugged, and although she feigned a pout, Lydia could see the excited smile beginning to form at the edges of her lips. Angela could not wait to be the belle of the ball and dance the night away.

She and her sister couldn't be more different. Although Angela was similar to Lydia in build—tall and slim—her hair was a dirty blonde rather than a white blonde, and her eyes were a deep and smooth chocolate brown.

Where Lydia was fierce, Angela was shy, coy even. She had a gentle nature and was soft-spoken. Her desire to learn was strong, as was her intelligence and wit—when she was brave enough to show it. But above all, above all that, Angela Stanley adored her sister like no other, and she would do whatever she could to ensure that Lydia was happy.

“Oh! I almost forgot,” Angela said, pulling a letter from the folds of her gown. “This arrived this morning. It's from William.”

“What does it say?” Lydia asked, eyeing the missive suspiciously. She was as close to her brother as she was to her sister, but seeing him always reminded her of the sheer size of her task—helping him become a duke and a gentleman.

“Read it yourself,” Angela said, thrusting the letter at Lydia.

Lydia suppressed a sigh and took it from her, watching her as she opened up the thick cream-colored paper. She read quickly, her eyes darting along the lines of neatly formed letters and words.

“His handwriting has improved, at least,” she murmured. When she reached the end, she frowned and looked back up at Angela. “He wants a holiday from school.”

“Only for two weeks,” Angela replied. “He knows we’ll be in London for the season and he’s eager to see us. What do you think?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Lydia said, a little taken aback. It was altogether *safer* with William away at school.

“It would be a great opportunity for us to spend time together again, like we used to. Don’t you remember the long days the three of us would spend together? I miss it dreadfully, and I know dear William does too.”

“Of course I remember,” Lydia replied. “But things were different then. His schooling is of the utmost importance. He cannot simply take a holiday because the fancy takes him.”

Though she would never admit it, Lydia longed to agree to William’s request. She remembered their days together with as much fondness as Angela.

And yes, it was true that his schooling was important. But that wasn’t the real and true reason Lydia was reluctant to say yes. She already had far too much to deal with, and raising a boy into a man felt like an impossible task. He needed a father, not a sister acting as one!

She sighed and let the page float down to the desk, then left the room without another word.

“Well?” Angela asked, following her out into the hallway.

Lydia picked her traveling cloak from the hook by the door, shrugged it on, then turned and smiled at her sister.

“We’ll talk about this later,” she said. “I’ve just remembered. I must visit poor old Tom.”

“The gardener?” Angela looked confused and Lydia fondly remembered the days when she, too, didn’t really follow the goings on of the house.

“He’s sick,” Lydia explained, doing up the buttons on her cloak. “I shall visit his home by the docks.”

“But what about William?”

Lydia already had the door open and was trotting down the steps, on her way to the coach house.

“I’ll deal with it later,” she called back over her shoulder. “Don’t fret about it, dear sister. Everything will be just fine.”

Chapter 3

“I’ve always had a special fondness for Dockside,” James said wistfully as he and Humphrey wound their way through the tight streets. “Something of the debauched about it, don’t you think?”

“Debauched might be a bit strong,” Humphrey said with a chuckle. “Just because it’s not the wealthiest part of the world, it’s not necessarily corrupt.”

“True enough,” James conceded with a tilt of his head. “But you’ve got to admit—this *is* where all the fun takes place.”

Humphrey shook his head but didn’t deign to reply. While he enjoyed spending time in Dockside and had good friends there, he didn’t *use* the place in the same way that James seemed to, flaunting his wealth and mocking the poor.

The mud on the narrow streets had hardened with the sun, although it was rough and uneven thanks to the hooves of horses and the ruts caused by cartwheels. The buildings, almost uniformly wooden, were pushed together in long terraces and all looked in need

of repair.

Despite that, it was a warm and friendly place—if you knew the right people. Those who lived there wore colorful clothes and laughed often, creating a jovial atmosphere that Humphrey had a fondness for.

They came out of Petty Lane and turned onto the main stretch in front of the docks. The road was much wider here, allowing for travelers and tradesmen to stack their wares, ready for shipping. Even now, there were three boats moored, thick rope tying them to the iron bollards sunk into the dockside.

They tipped and waved as the water gently sloshed against the wall, and all around them, sailors shouted and called, and passengers waved their goodbyes to loved ones.

“I do hope this sailor friend of yours can get me on a boat, too,” James said.

He longed to travel, as Humphrey had, but his father had been against it from the moment he suggested it.

“With money, you can do anything, my friend,” Humphrey said with a chuckle.

“That’s just it—Father has refused me the money. I guess I’ll have to find a way to earn something of my own.”

“God forbid you should actually have to find your own way in the world,” Humphrey teased, raising an eyebrow at his friend.

“Point taken.”

Where the ladies of the narrow streets behind them were dressed in bright reds and blues and greens, the workers who dashed across the docks wore browns and beiges. It always made Humphrey imagine they had taken the very essence of the docks—the mudded floor, the murky sea, the wood of the boats—and painted it over themselves, from hat to shoe.

It was far more likely, of course, that the work was dirty. But of the sailors Humphrey had met, he knew that they absorbed the work

into their very lives, the sea being the only mistress they loved. It suited them, and they grew to match the dockside itself.

“Which tavern?” James asked, turning to look at the row of buildings facing the water.

There was a mix of buildings, some trading goods that came off the ships—tobacco and coffee and tea. There were a few different taverns, too. And built on top of each were houses, often added after the fact thanks to a lack of housing in the area.

“That one,” Humphrey said with a nod of his head.

“The Old Barge. Of course. The most respectable of all the Dockside taverns.” James stated sarcastically.

Humphrey threw him a disapproving glance. “We’re here to see Joe, remember? Not to visit the dancing girls.”

“Dancing girls? Me?” James put a hand to his chest and feigned outrage, before bursting into laughter.

“I’m serious,” Humphrey cried. “I shan’t introduce you if I cannot trust you.”

“You’re absolutely right,” James said, pushing his lips together in a pout and nodding. “I will be on my very best behavior.”

Humphrey eyed him warily but then said, “All right. Let’s go. He’s certain to be there at this time of day.”

As they approached the tavern, Humphrey saw a well-dressed lady leaving one of the houses. He paused and watched, intrigued to see a woman of status in such a village. She wore a gown of dusky pink, so clean, by comparison, that it almost glowed, and her light blonde hair was adorned by a matching pink ribbon.

He was about to ask James about it, to find out if he knew her, but then she looked up, and Humphrey gasped.

Lady Lydia Stanley.

“Now there’s a waste of a pretty face, if I ever saw one,” James muttered into Humphrey’s ear.

Humphrey turned his head briefly to look at James’ grimace, brow furrowed, then turned back to Lady Lydia.

“Whatever do you mean?” he asked.

“That scar,” James replied as if it were perfectly obvious. “Such a beautiful young thing, and now she’s entirely ruined. Makes me shiver just to see it.”

Humphrey didn’t reply, not trusting the words that would come out if he did. In truth, he hadn’t really noticed the scar. Of course, he had seen it—it was obvious enough—but he hadn’t considered it. Not really. It was not that which had drawn his attention.

It was the pride with which she carried herself and the steely determination in her eyes that he had noticed. Before his travels, she had been so . . . wispy. And now, she seemed fortified, strong. The scar across her cheek was the least of the changes her accident had

wrought.

Lady Lydia seemed an entirely different person, and Humphrey found himself intrigued. For the first time in his life, he wanted to know more about her.

“Let’s go over and wish her a good day,” Humphrey said, starting off across the road without waiting for a reply.

James reached out and grabbed his arm, halting him.

“Must we?” he asked, like a child who had been asked to greet an elderly aunt who smelled of boiled cabbage.

“Yes,” Humphrey said firmly, shooting James a look. “It will only take a couple of minutes, and then we’ll go meet Joe.”

“Fine. But you do know there are much prettier girls to talk to, don’t you?”

Humphrey saw James’ distaste in the thin line of his lips and the

shadow beneath his eyes, but he didn't protest any further.

"Lady Lydia," Humphrey called out as they trotted across the road, quick to catch up with her and her chaperone.

They seemed to scamper quickly, the skirts of their gowns kicking out as they went, their hands clasped in front of them, each with a reticule dangling from a wrist.

"Lady Lydia," he tried again, just as he neared them. He stopped and chuckled, catching his breath. "I thought it was you."

Lady Lydia still didn't seem to notice his arrival. Her chaperone—a short young lady with dark hair and none of the presence of Lydia herself—stared at him open-mouthed and nudged Lydia with her elbow.

"What is it—oh!"

She looked from her friend to Humphrey and very briefly to James, her eyes wide with surprise. He could tell just from her

expression that it was rare for anyone to stop her in the street—and even rarer for a man she had once known, before he went off traveling.

“Lord Humphrey! You’re back in the area. How lovely.”

Her words were simple, polite. She didn’t sound particularly overjoyed to see him, nor as though it was indeed *lovely* that he had returned. He didn’t suppose she would have reason to think any of those things, but he still couldn’t help but feel a vague sting of disappointment.

He had been so intrigued by this new and improved Lydia Stanley that he reasoned she would also be intrigued by him. But she most evidently was not, and given the unyielding, determined way she held herself, he wondered idly whether she ever found anything interesting.

“Yes. Actually, I only arrived home this morning,” he tried, offering her his warmest of smiles.

“We’re fortunate to see you so soon, then.”

Though she was polite, she did not smile in return. She raised her eyebrows, as though expecting more from him, and he found himself momentarily tongue-tied. She was so incredibly different from how she once was, and he was eager to know more. He just wished he knew how he could discover it.

“Lady Lydia!” James said brightly over Humphrey’s shoulder.

“Lord Brighton.”

Humphrey had to stifle a giggle. The distasteful glare she gave James was proof enough that she had heard rumors about his poor behavior and his lack of decorum.

“Don’t you look delightful today,” he said.

Humphrey heard the mocking tone and hoped that Lady Lydia hadn’t noticed. But the way in which she narrowed her eyes told him she had understood his jibe perfectly well. Again, Humphrey

controlled the twitch at the corner of his lips.

“I must say, it’s somewhat of a surprise to see you here, in Dockside,” Humphrey said. “Are you planning on doing some traveling?”

“No,” Lady Lydia replied, with a humorless chuckle. “Goodness, no. Far too much to do here, unfortunately. I have been visiting an employee of mine. He’s sick, unfortunately, but I think he will pull through it.”

“Good,” Humphrey said, his voice high with surprise at her words, *an employee*.

He marveled once again about how different she had become, how mature and articulate. The conversation fell into silence. Humphrey saw Lydia’s companion shifting on her feet, although Lydia herself held still and unwavering.

He so dearly wanted to talk to her, to find out what had changed and what was different. He wanted to learn more about her and what

she did. And even as he thought all this, he couldn't work out *why* he wanted that.

"Well, as lovely as it has been to catch up, we've got an appointment in the tavern," James said, once again over Humphrey's shoulder, but this time pulling at his arm as well.

"Good day to you both," Lady Lydia said, nodding politely and turning away from them.

Humphrey watched them go for a moment then joined his friend, who was already marching towards the tavern.

"The ale is calling," James said over his shoulder. Humphrey chuckled then jogged to catch up.

The tavern wasn't too far away, at the end of the block. It was a corner building, and so two of its walls were covered in large windows. Even though it was daytime, Humphrey could see the flicker of candlelight in the windows and, in the distance, the warm orange glow of a fire.

He knew they would be engulfed in noise as soon as they entered—from the broken but playable piano in the corner to the chatter and excitement of the patrons.

“It’s hard to believe she’s the same Lydia Stanley I knew years ago.”

“Indeed,” James said, his hand against the swinging door of the tavern, ready to enter. He half turned back to Humphrey. “She’s been running that estate all alone since the accident, and though she has gained respect for her strength and ability, she has also engendered fear.”

He pushed open the door and they were consumed by the sound and the warmth, the mood of the place instantly lifting the spirits Humphrey had realized needed lifting. He blindly followed James to an empty table in the far corner—small and round and in the perfect spot to have a good view of everybody else in the room.

James raised his hand to signal the innkeeper then ordered two

pints of ale without even asking Humphrey what he wanted.

“Fear?” Humphrey asked, having been stuck on the word since James uttered it at the entrance.

“What?”

“You said she engenders fear,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, we’re still talking about her.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said, feeling his irritation rising. “What did you mean?”

“Well.” James shrugged. “All men fear her now on account of that coldness you witnessed today, and of course, because of that awful scar as well. You’d think she’d go to some sort of effort to hide it, wouldn’t you? It’s nauseating.”

“Perhaps you ought to just stop talking now,” Humphrey replied, scowling at James.

If he thought he was irritated before, now he felt it tenfold. He couldn't quite work out why. She meant nothing to him, and she never had, yet hearing James talk about her with such disrespect incensed him. He closed his eyes and sighed.

Humphrey Berkeley, your travels have really turned you soft.

Be A Part of Fanny Finch's Family

I write for you, the readers, and I love hearing from you! Thank you for your ongoing support as we journey through the most romantic era together.

If you're not a member of my family yet, it's never too late. Stay up to date on upcoming releases and check out the website for all information on romance.

I hope my stories touch you as deeply as you have impacted me. Enjoy the happily ever after!

Let's connect and download your [Free Exclusive Story here!](http://BookHip.com/MMLGXA)

(Available only to my subscribers)

<http://BookHip.com/MMLGXA>

About Starfall Publications

Starfall Publications has helped me and so many others extend my passion from writing to you.

The prime focus of this company has been – and always will be – quality and I am honored to be able to publish my books under their name.

Having said that, I would like to officially thank Starfall Publications for offering me the opportunity to be part of such a wonderful, hard-working team!

Thanks to them, my dreams – and your dreams — have come true!

About Fanny Finch

Fanny Finch was born in United Kingdom but moved to Denver, Colorado when she was very young. She attended Washington University where she studied for several years and she now lives with her husband and their bulldog.

Upon leaving university, Fanny found a job as a proof reader for a small press. There, she honed her skills and also met and worked with author Abby Ayles, who helped her polish her books to perfection. But she is also an author in her own right and is working hard to become recognized as such as she starts to publish her own novels through her website. Her genre is in the Historical Regency Romance category and if you like your reading material to be emotionally clean then you will be undoubtedly thrilled by the characters and scenarios Fanny develops.

When she has time to relax, Fanny enjoys listening to opera music and taking long walks in the outdoors. She writes almost every day as well and hopes to produce many more great books in the future. You can contact Fanny Finch through her website, or download a free copy of her books at: fannyfinch.com

You can contact the author at:

fannyfinchauthor@gmail.com

Also by Fanny Finch

- Saving Lady Abigail
- Engaging Love
- A Fortright Courtship
- A Love Worth Saving
- Love Letters to A Lady
- The Duke's Cautious Governess
- A Lady's Choice
- An Earl for Her Hopeless Heart
- Last Chance for the Charming Ladies
- A Second Chance for the Broken Duke
- A Fiery love for the Reluctant Duchess
 - Enchanted by the Mysterious Marquess
 - The Redemption of the Puzzling Governess
 - A Night Rose for the Duke
 - The Portrait of a Rebellious Lady

A White Rose for the Marquess

- Extraordinary Tales of Regency Love
- A Countess In Her Own Right
- The Mystery of the Iron Duke
- A Sea Rose for the Duchess

- His Cinderella Governess
- An Enduring Love for the Lost Marquess
- A Graceful Swan for the Fearless Marquess
- A Duke's Charming Spy
- Healing the Endearing Marquess
- Regency Tales of Graceful Roses
- A Sleeping Beauty for the Marquess
- Regency Tales of Love and Mystery
- The Transformation of the Bashful Lady
- The Marquess' Reluctant Bride
- A Tricky Courtship for the Heartbroken Duke
- A Love Worth Pursuing
- For the Love of a Broken Marquess
- The Curse of Lady Clarabelle
- A Christmas Miracle for the Marquess
- The Earl, the Lady and the Song of Love
- Regency Confessions
- For the Heart of a Rebellious Governess
- Taming the Thorn of Blackwell
- Braving the Outbreak with the Duke
- Training Lord Somerset

- Tales of Secrecy and Enduring Love